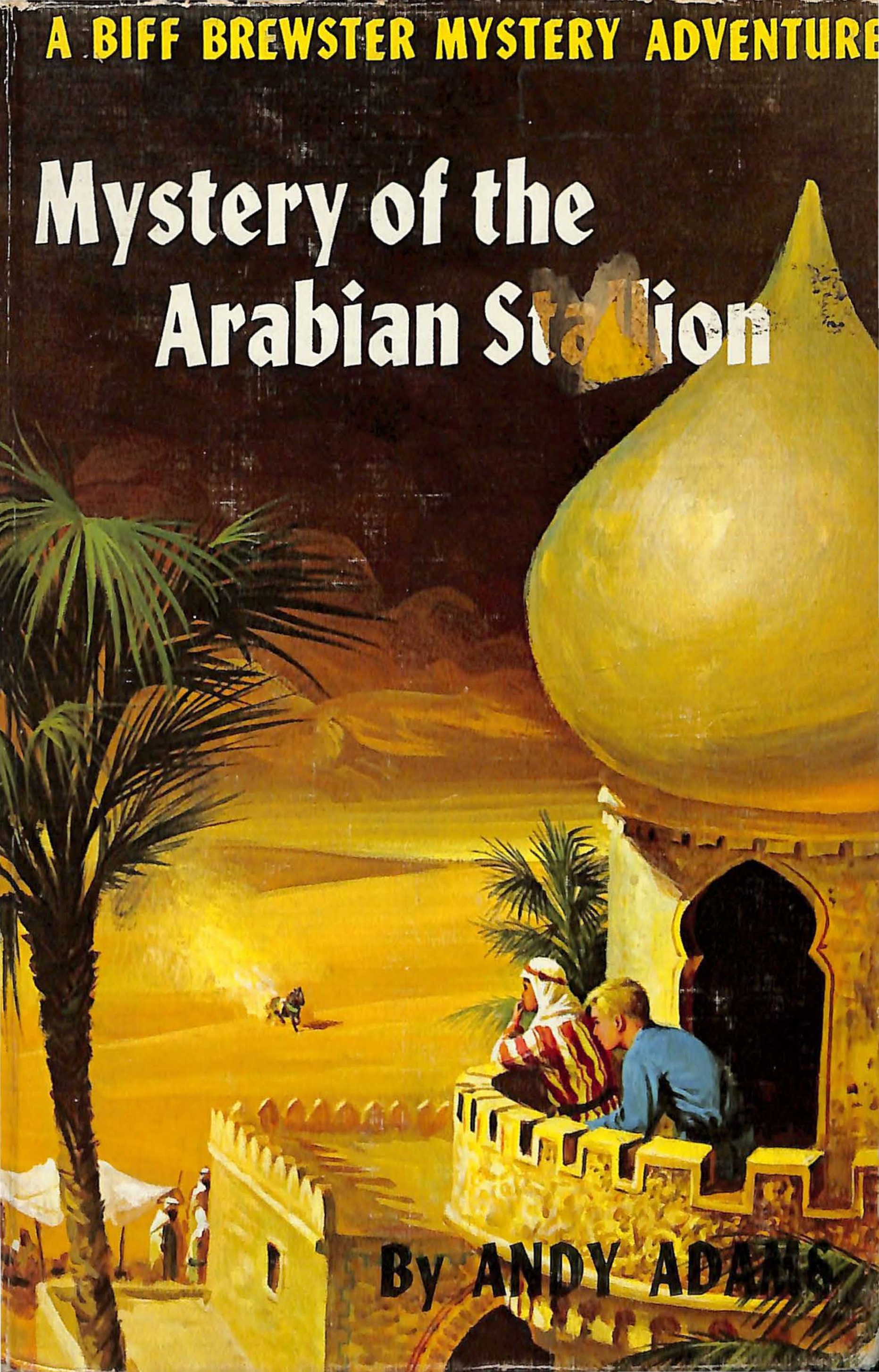
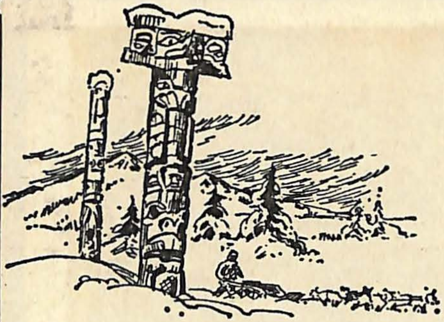
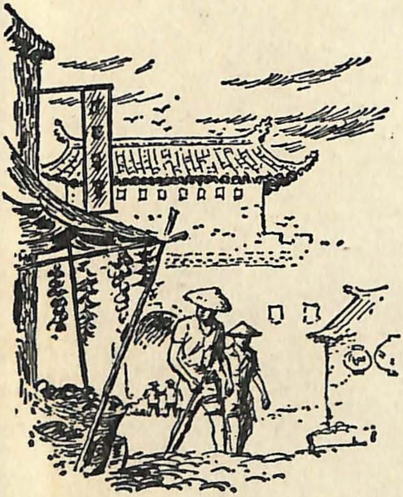
A BIFF BREWSTER MYSTERY ADVENTURE

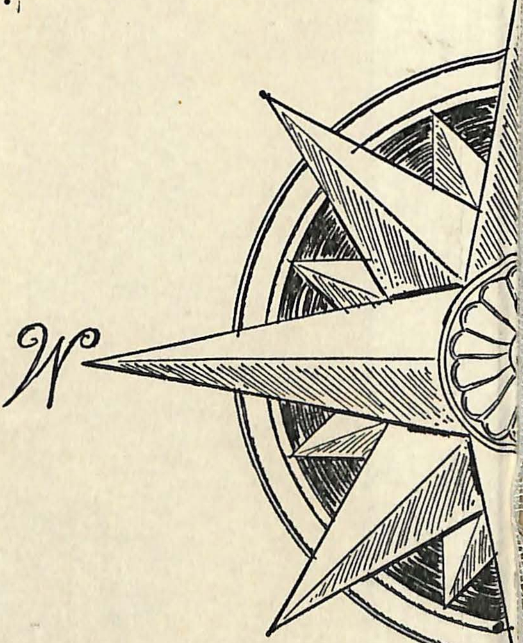
Mystery of the Arabian Stallion

By ANDY ADAMS





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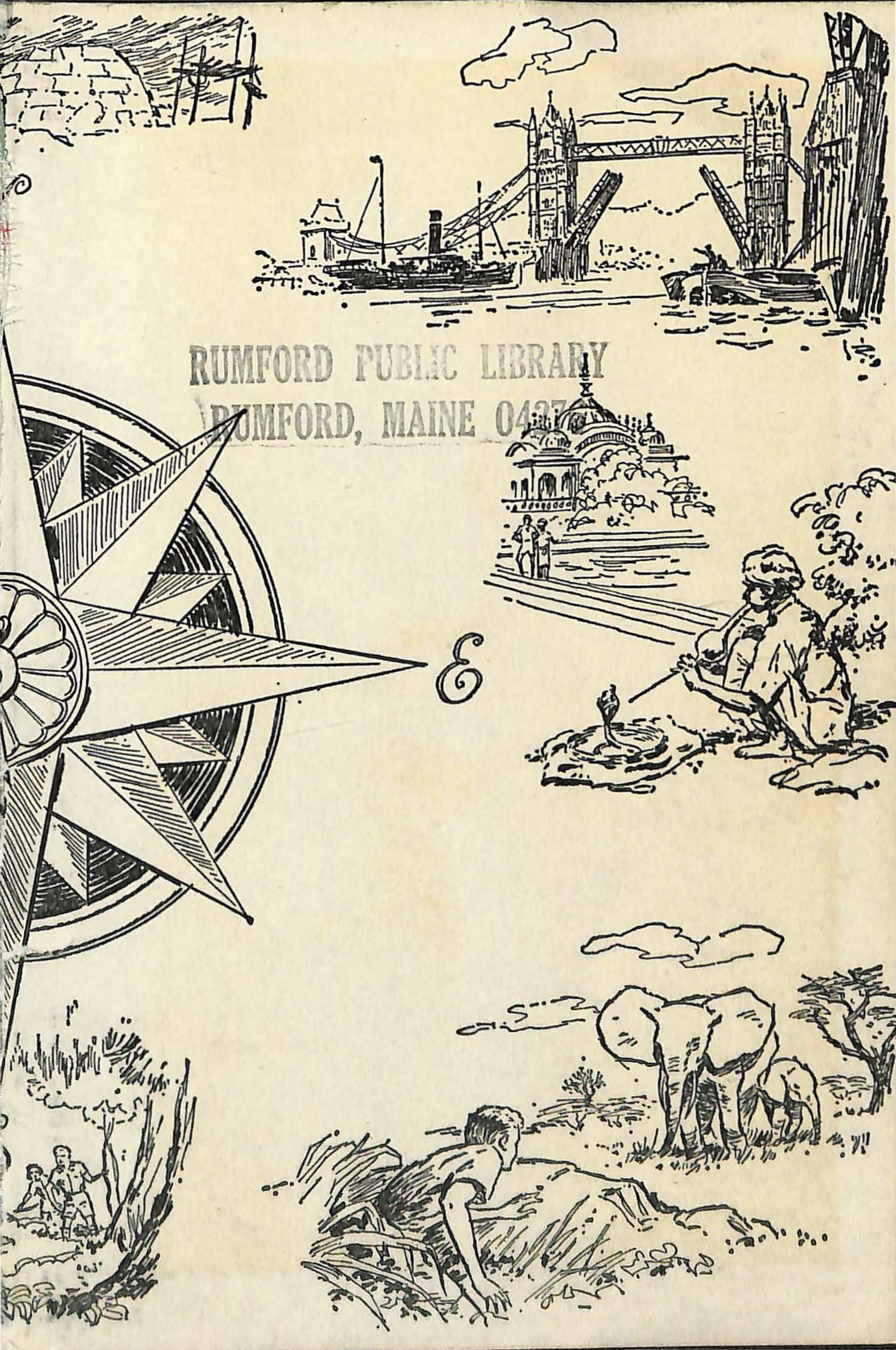

MYSTERY OF THE ARABIAN STALLION

Awakened suddenly by a high lingering call, Biff Brewster watched the dawn light on the homes, oil derricks, and processing towers of Aramco City, and the vast Arabian desert that lay beyond. Little did Biff realize that within a short while, he and his new friend Ahmed would be traveling via "Cadillac" camel on that same desert, fighting exhaustion, heat, thirst, and a sandstorm.

When Biff learned of the disappearance of Suji, the golden stallion, a royal gift to Ahmed, he offered to help in the search. A trail of horses' hoofs led the two boys to an isolated village in the middle of the desert where they stumbled upon a deserted minaret. From its top, they viewed a black Cadillac and a strange outline of an oil mechanism fingered in the sand; they overheard a man in a white *abbas* speaking with another in Arab dress; and an odor peculiar to oil reached their nostrils.

Biff and Ahmed suspected that all this might have something to do with the Arabs' oil-field pressure problem which the boys' fathers were researching. But, with their slim chance for survival, would Biff and Ahmed be able to get this puzzling information to the men?

Here is a good story with a fascinating background, waiting to be read—and *kismet* has placed it right in your hands.

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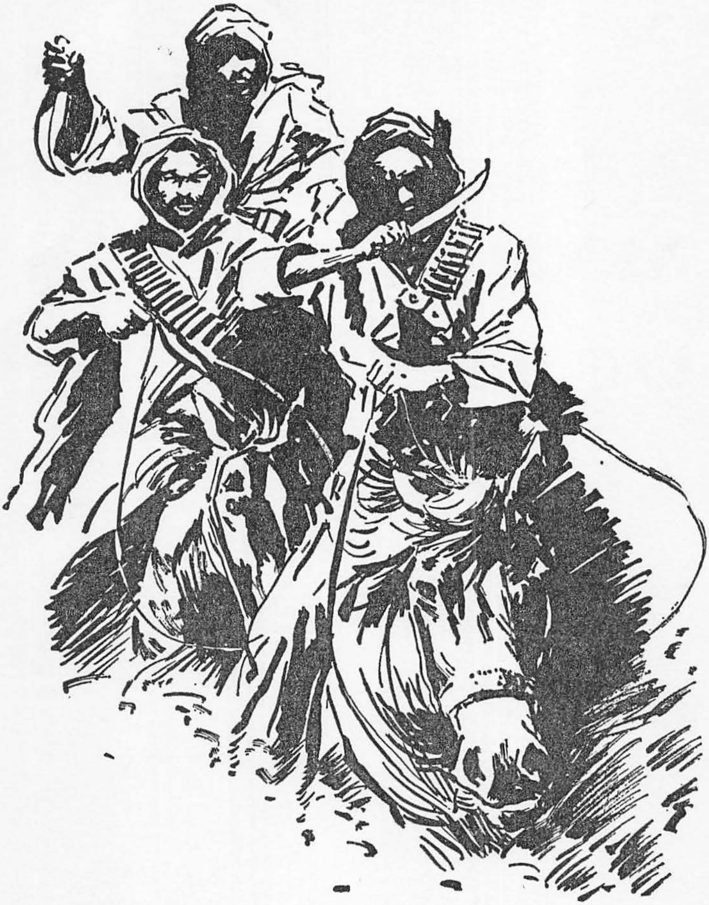
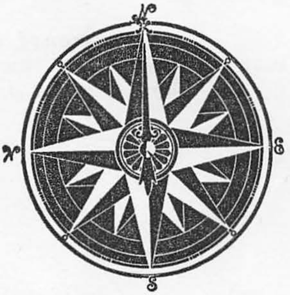


The Arab lashed out with the curved dagger

A BIFF BREWSTER

MYSTERY ADVENTURE



MYSTERY OF THE ARABIAN STALLION

By ANDY ADAMS

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Mystery of the Arabian Stallion

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CHAPTER I

Double Jeopardy

"*ALLAH Akbaaaaaar!*"

The high, lingering wail startled Biff Brewster from a sound sleep.

"*La ilah illa Allaaaah!*" sang the call which drifted through the open window from some place far away.

Biff blinked to get his bearings, then gave a slow sigh of relief. "The call to prayer again," he mumbled. "If we stay in Arabia ten years, I'll never get used to being wakened that way. How about you, Dad?" He glanced over at the other twin bed.

It was rumpled and empty.

"Off to get his worrying done early, I guess," Biff thought. He stretched and rolled out of bed. Scratching his blond head, he pattered to the bedroom window and peered out into the gray dawn light. Close by, he could see the stark shapes of oil derricks and processing towers silhouetted against the pinkening sky. Beyond their skeletal forms lay a flat and shadowy plain that stretched with monotonous sameness all the way to the horizon—the Arabian desert.

Somewhere out there in that wasteland, he knew that nomads in tent cities were rising to a similar wailing call—the call that commanded all Moslems everywhere to rise and bow to the east and pray to the one God, Allah. And in the Arab villages, the muezzins were standing now, chanting the very call which still lingered on the breeze.

"If it weren't for that call to prayer, I'd hardly know I was in Arabia," Biff thought.

He closed the window and headed for the shower. He was glad his dad wasn't here to listen to him complain about the lack of genuine Arab color in the desert oil compound where Mr. Brewster was working. Biff had remarked about the lack of authentic Arabian atmosphere in Aramco City so many times, his father had requested him to change the subject.

"Well, I'm right," Biff thought as he doffed his pajamas to take a shower. "We might as well have stayed home for all the Arabia I'm getting to see." He glanced out the window at the streets of the oil compound with its lawns and ranch-style homes. "Just like Indianapolis, U.S.A."

He turned on the shower and wrinkled his nose at the strong-smelling water pouring from the nozzle. "At least, that well water is the real McCoy," he thought grimly. He felt a twinge of guilt about his lavish use of the water, for he knew there were nomads not many miles from this spot who had to draw their water in buckets from deep down in a desert well.

"Not that I've seen 'em any place except the Encyclopedia," he mumbled as he turned off the water. "And not that I ever will either, the way things are going; jumping from one oil compound to another behind Dad—never seeing a sheik or a Bedouin or even a tent. Haven't got a single picture to take home to Mom and the twins."

He put on a sport shirt, a pair of chino pants, and some heavy engineer's boots, hung his reflex camera around his neck by its leather cord, and put on a long-billed cap. Slipping on his dark glasses, he walked out the door of the quarters provided for him and his father by the Aramco Oil Company.

He climbed on his bike and pedaled along the street in the swiftly brightening day, headed for a group of buildings in the center of Aramco City. As he drew near the Aramco cafeteria, he saw some dark-skinned men entering the place and knew they were Arabs. However, instead of head shawls and robes, they wore slacks, denim shirts, and the steel safety helmets which were required of all oil workers in the compound.

Biff parked his bike and entered the big double doors of the company cafeteria. As he pushed open the second door, a blast of cool air swept over him.

"Ah, good old air-conditioning," he murmured. "That much U.S.A. in Arabia I like." He sniffed. "And bacon and eggs are permissible too."

He glanced about the cafeteria. There was a scattering of blond and blue-eyed American faces, made more vividly so by the black-haired, brown-eyed, and hawk-nosed oil field hands among them. Here and there, flashing Arab teeth indicated that the easy camaradarie which came so naturally to Americans had infected the normally restrained Arabians and made the troup a homogenous, happy family of just plain roughnecks.

At the edge of the crowd of oil workers, Biff caught sight of his father seated at a table with two men. One—the velvety-brown, gaunt-shouldered man with the Arab headpiece—Biff knew. Khalil Kadir.

Loading his tray with an ample breakfast, Biff headed for his father's table.

"Good morning, Dad," he called cheerily. "*Salaam*, Mr. Kadir," he said to the Arab technician.

The Arab's dark eyes twinkled in appreciation of Biff's use of the middle-eastern greeting, and his bright teeth flashed. "*Salaam, effendi*," he answered in a low, rich voice.

Biff's father cleared a place for him and with a nod at the other man, he said, "Biff, this is Rex Craig, a correspondent for *Global News*. Mr. Craig, my son."

Rex Craig gripped Biff's hand and said, "Howdy, pal. Where you headed with the camera?"

"Gonna get some real Arabian-type shots of Arabia to take back home." Biff smiled. Then turning toward Khalil Kadir, he added, "That is, if Mr. Kadir's son Ahmed shows up with his robes and Arabian stallion as he promised. He goes around looking like an American oil-field roughneck so much, I have to make an appointment for him to look like a genuine Arab."

As the three men laughed, Biff glanced around the cafeteria and added, "Where is Ahmed this morning, Mr. Kadir?"

"Currying Suji, his stallion, for the fourth or fifth time, I shouldn't be surprised," said Khalil Kadir, glancing at his wrist watch, "or perhaps thinking of some more questions to ask you about America."

"He says when he receives a scholarship to go to America, he wants to be sure which is the Brooklyn Bridge so no one will sell it to him," Biff chuckled.

The reporter reached over and tapped Biff's camera with his forefinger. "Looks like a good outfit," he said. "How about shooting a few pix for me?"

"My fee is pretty high." Biff grinned. "What do you need?"

"Oh, how about one of your dad bending over a nervous oil gauge?" said the reporter with a quick glance at Tom Brewster. "That seems to be the main item of concern around here these days—so the rumor goes, I mean."

Biff glanced at his dad to see the effect of the reporter's bantering remark, for he knew the subject of fluctuating oil gauges was a touchy one right now. Mr. Brewster was not smiling; nor was the dark-eyed Khalil Kadir.

Rex Craig looked from one to the other and with a self-conscious cough said, "Well, so I stuck my foot in my mouth. But that is the rumor. Now if you'd just let a fellow in on the real dope . . ."

Tom Brewster looked up slowly and glanced at Khalil Kadir, who sighed and nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Well, I suppose you'll dig it out sooner or later," Biff's dad said quietly. "The truth is the entire Aramco oil field has been hit by a sudden and mysterious fluctuation in oil pressure."

"Mysterious, you say?" the reporter asked.

"Perhaps mysterious was the wrong word," said Tom Brewster. "Puzzling might be more accurate."

"I prefer mysterious," said Khalil Kadir, speaking for the first time.

"Oh?" said Rex Craig, the note in his voice an invitation to further explanation.

"Oil beneath these sands has been stored under tremendous pressure for thousands of years. There is no logical geologic reason why this pressure should suddenly diminish. If it continues to do so, the wells will soon lack enough pressure to force the oil to the surface."

"Then, to put it in a nutshell," said Rex Craig, "the whole Ghawar oil field is threatening to go flat as a two-day-old soda, right?"

"Quite right," said Biff's dad.

"So Aramco sent for you to try and find the leak, huh?" said the reporter.

"I suppose you could say that," Mr. Brewster replied, and by the tone of his voice, Biff could see he was becoming annoyed by the reporter's flippant manner.

"But oil isn't your specialty, is it?" asked Rex Craig.

"I've had experience in seismographic study of earth strata," said Biff's father, "with special emphasis on the paleozoic area, in which the oil of this field is found."

"Phew!" the reporter joked. "You're getting too far out for me now." He took out pencil and pad and said, "Can you give it to me in words of one syllable that my readers can understand?"

"I have more urgent work to do at the moment," Tom Brewster said bluntly. "I'll be glad to talk to you this evening in my quarters if you'd care to drop by."

The reporter shrugged. "Okay," he said. "I'll take a look around the compound and get back to you tonight."

He rose as if to leave, but before he could do so, the whole group was startled by the sound of a high, distressed shouting outside the cafeteria. It was a young voice, jabbering in staccato Arabic, and it was drawing closer to the building in which they stood. Then, as they all turned toward the sound, the doors burst open and a brown form hurtled into the cafeteria.

It was a gaunt Arab boy about Biff's age, and the face was a copy in miniature of Khalil Kadir's, who was standing beside Biff.

"Ahmed, my son!" called Khalil Kadir to the distressed boy standing in the doorway.

At the sound of his father's voice, the boy ran across the cafeteria, babbling in excited Arabic. His dark brown eyes were opened so wide, the whites seemed more startlingly white. The shirt he wore was disheveled and only half fastened as though he had dressed in panic. As he dashed up to his father, he almost threw himself at the tall man and again, unleashed a torrent of excited Arabic.

"Ahmed!" snapped the tall Arabian engineer. "Calmly—in English!"

The boy stopped, took a deep breath, and then in perfect English said, "Oh, my father—Suji, my beautiful golden stallion, has disappeared!"

And with that, big tears gushed from the boy's eyes and rolled down his cheeks. The engineer clasped his son to his chest and to the amazement of Biff, his father, and the reporter, tears welled from Khalil Kadir's brown eyes as well.

Biff stared in disbelief at the scene, but even as he stared, the reporter nudged him and pointed toward the Arab workers gathered in the cafeteria. As one, they had risen to their feet and it appeared that they too were about to burst into tears!

CHAPTER II

Warm Trail

"WHAT goes on here?" Rex Craig drawled. "Everybody bursting into tears over a lost horse?"

"Suji is pretty special to Ahmed and all these men," Biff said.

"The only horses I ever cried over were ones I bet on," the reporter cracked. "What's so special about this one—this Suji he's talking about?"

"There's a story goes with him," said Biff, watching Khalil Kadir lead his son toward the group of Arab workers starting to crowd around the boy.

"Oh, a story." The reporter grinned. "Well, that's more like it."

"Suji was given to Ahmed by the King of Arabia, Ibn Saud himself," said Biff.

"Ibn Saud—gave that little Arab punk one of his prize horses? You're kidding!" gasped the reporter. Biff shot the reporter a hard look for his slighting reference to Ahmed. "A couple of years ago Ibn Saud's favorite son was taken ill with a serious disease which required blood transfusions. He had a very rare type blood, and after searching the kingdom for someone who could supply the blood and save his life, they found that Ahmed had that type blood. He went to live at the palace and every so often for months gave blood to Ibn Saud's son. It saved the young prince's life, and in gratitude the King told Ahmed he could have whatever gift he wished. Ahmed chose Suji, the golden stallion from Ibn Saud's stable. It's been a source of pride not only to Ahmed, but to all the Arabs at this compound."

"You mean the King gave the kid his choice of loot and he chose a horse?" gasped the reporter.

"Arabs consider horses among the most precious possessions in life," Biff said. "That's why these Arabs took the loss almost as hard as Ahmed. They were proud to even know someone who owned such an animal."

"You sound like you're real buddy-buddy with Ahmed here," said the reporter.

"He's my age and about my year in school," said Biff. "I tell him about the States, and he is showing me the ropes about Saudi Arabia."

The reporter motioned toward Ahmed and the Arab workers crowded around him.

"Your buddy's sending up a distress signal, I think," he said.

Biff looked over toward Ahmed, and he could see the boy's great, expressive eyes signaling to him.

"Excuse me, Mr. Craig—I'd better go see if I can help," said Biff, edging toward Ahmed.

"Sure, go ahead," the reporter said with a wave of his hand. He turned and headed for the door. Biff pushed his way toward the center of the circle of Arab workers where Ahmed was standing.

"Biff, *effendi*—will you help me find Suji?" said the Arab boy when Biff reached his side.

"Sure." Biff smiled. "Where do we start?"

"There are tracks," said Ahmed.

Immediately the Arab workers around them broke into an unintelligible babble. Ahmed's father held up his hands to silence them.

"You will be quiet, all of you, and go to your duties," he commanded in his deep, resonant voice. "It is for Ahmed to find the stallion; no doubt, it was some carelessness of his which allowed the animal to wander off."

"No, my father," Ahmed protested. "I must tell you—"

"Come, be on the trail," commanded his father. "Your wailing has disrupted our duties." He turned to Biff's father. "I am sorry, Mr. Brewster, Ahmed did not mean to involve us in his personal problems."

"I understand perfectly," said Tom Brewster. "I know how much Suji means to the boy—to all of you, for that matter."

"I'll help him look, Dad," said Biff.

"Yes, do that," said his father. He paused and closed one eye. "And be careful."

"Of what?" Biff asked innocently.

"Who knows?" His father smiled. "But if there's something around that you should be careful of, you'll find it."

"Not me." Biff smiled back. "I've quit troubleshootin'." He bowed to Ahmed in the Arabic style, touching fingers to forehead and chest, and said, "Lead on, *effendi.*"

Ahmed nodded and headed for the cafeteria door, with a couple of the Arabs in his wake whispering Arabic advice into his ear. Arabic speech was strange and almost comic to American ears, but Biff knew from the reading he had done before coming to Arabia, that it was a rich and very ancient language originated by nomadic wanderers ages before English was even dreamed of.

Bill followed Ahmed out the doors into the bright sunlight, and he squinted in spite of his sunglasses. Ahmed hurried toward his own bicycle and Biff called after him, "What's the story on Suji, Ahmed?"

"Come, I will show you," said the Arab boy over his shoulder.

They climbed aboard their bikes and with Ahmed leading the way, they pedaled rapidly down the main street of the compound toward the south end of Aramco City where many of the Saudi Arabian workers had their homes.

Biff had been secretly disappointed not to find Ahmed's family living in a tent, but to Ahmed it was a source of pride that aside from a few concessions to Arabic taste, his house was almost exactly like the houses belonging to American workers.

Biff had been to Ahmed's house a couple of times since meeting him at the Aramco City High School. It had been part of the bargain made with Biff's Indianapolis school officials that he visit a Saudi Arabian school and report on its differences to his schoolmates. He had agreed to get pictures of Saudi Arabian people in authentic native costume. But to date, Ahmed had been his closest contact with a hundred per cent Arabian, and Ahmed spent his time trying hard to be at least fifty per cent American in preparation for a forthcoming trip to the States to take advantage of a scholarship he had won. His father was one of the first Saudi Arabian professional men employed by Aramco Oil Company, and Ahmed hoped to follow in his footsteps.

Biff had fallen behind Ahmed, and he hurried to catch up. As he drew abreast of the Arab lad, he said, "I hope we aren't going looking for Suji on these bikes. It's warm work."

"They wouldn't be much good in the desert," Ahmed answered, without turning to look at Biff.

Biff studied Ahmed's serious gaze for a moment and said, "Don't take it so hard. We'll find him. After all, how far can he go in this desert without water? When he gets good and thirsty, he'll head for home."

"If they let him," said Ahmed.

"They? What do you mean, they?" Biff inquired.

"That is what I tried to tell my father," said Ahmed. "I think—I'm afraid Suji was stolen."

"So . . . we'll catch 'em and put 'em in the pokey," Biff drawled; then, noticing the puzzled expression on Ahmed's face, he said, "Pokey, pen . . . jail. That's what we do back home to folks with sticky fingers."

"Here in my country," said Ahmed, "they *lose* their fingers."

"Beg pardon?" said Biff.

"For theft in Arabia a man loses a hand."

"Cut off?" Biff gasped.

Ahmed nodded slowly. "That is for ordinary theft. For stealing a horse, man's transportation in the desert. . . . his head."

"Hmm," said Biff. "What are you going to look for Suji in, an armored car?"

"We will use Zenobia," said Ahmed.

"Zenobia?"

"My camel."

Biff groaned.

"You do not like camels?" Ahmed asked.

"Not to knock the national animal of Arabia or anything like that," said Biff, "but the last one I rode felt like he was stuffed with rocks. And I didn't think much of his disposition either."

"There is an old Arab legend," said Ahmed, "which says that when Allah created the Arabian horse, the steed complained because his hoofs were not efficient in the sands of the desert and he could not stand the sun or make the long gallops between water holes. So Allah made the camel and when the horse saw what he would have to look like to do those things, he was content to be a horse and never complained again."

"I get the idea you're telling me stories to lull me into a sense of false security," Biff drawled. "If the penalty for thievery in Arabia is all you say, it takes some pretty rough characters to risk stealing. Do we really want to catch up with them?"

"If you wish to not go—" Ahmed began.

"Who said anything about not going?" Biff snorted. "I'll make a deal with you. How about finding a jeep instead of a camel?"

"But Zenobia is a veritable Cadillac of a camel," said Ahmed.

Biff heaved a deep sigh. "Oh well," he groaned. "As I said in Alaska, in Mexico, in Africa, in Tibet—here I go again and on a humpbacked rockpile!"

CHAPTER III

Unmanageable Mirage

ZENOBIA was stork-legged, knobby-kneed, pillow-footed, dirty-white, and she wheezed.

"She sounds sick," said Biff.

"She misses Suji," said Ahmed. "They have been together since both were babies in the royal stables. She came with Suji."

Biff studied Zenobia's haughty expression and said, "Camels always look as though they know something they aren't telling."

Ahmed carried a huge saddle from inside the little shelter which had served as a stable for the missing Suji. The stable was in Ahmed's back yard, and beside it was a bed of straw where Zenobia lay with her legs doubled under her. The Arab boy placed the saddle on Zenobia's back, reached under her, and passed the cinch strap to Biff on the other side. The saddle was a wooden frame with pommel and cantle over which was stretched a leather covering. On top of it was a layer of sheepskin, some old rugs, and a blanket or two. From the saddle, Ahmed hung two rug bags and two full waterskins.

"Are we going for the weekend?" Biff asked, eyeing the voluminous equipment.

"In the desert, one prepares," said Ahmed.

Biff looked out at the whitening sun and blew a little trickle of perspiration off the end of his nose. "I wish I had something besides this short-sleeved shirt to wear," he said.

"You shall," said Ahmed. He reached within one of the saddle bags and withdrew a long, robelike garment. He also procured a white head shawl and a twisted ropen, wreathlike affair and handed them to Biff.

"They're ideal for desert travel," Ahmed said. "Reduce moisture loss from the body, keep off the sun, provide protection from blowing sand and are nice bedclothes."

"Thanks! Let's hope we don't have to wear 'em that long," said Biff. "What do I do, put 'em on over or take off and put on?"

"Take off and put on," Ahmed answered with a smile.

Biff stepped into the barn and stripped down to his underwear. Then he donned the garments and strode forward. "What's all this stuff called?" he asked.

"The robe is the *abbas*, the head shawl is a *kiffieh*, and the rope to hold the shawl down is an *ighal*," said Ahmed.

"How about you?" Biff demanded. "Aren't you going to put on the uniform?"

"Of course," said Ahmed, reaching into the other saddle bag. He withdrew *abbas, kiffieh, igbal,* and a flimsy red garment.

"What are those?" Biff inquired.

"What the true Arab wears under his *abbas,*" announced Ahmed. He held them up for Biff's appraisal. They were the gaudiest pair of fire-engine-red pantaloons Biff had ever seen.

"Bloomers!" he howled.

"Pardon?" Ahmed asked.

"Oh, er, uh—" stammered Biff, suddenly recalling his father's repeated warnings about Arab pride. "Bloomers—that's just an American slang expression —of surprise."

"I'm sorry I do not have a pair for you," said Ahmed.

"Don't think a thing about it," said Biff with a sigh of relief. He reached down and picked up his camera. Hanging it around his neck, he said, "I ought to take a picture of each of us in these things."

"We haven't time," said Ahmed. "We must mount and be on our way."

"Where are the tracks you were talking about—the ones that made you think Suji was stolen?" asked Biff.

"We mount, then I show you," said Ahmed.

"Okay, I'll bite." Biff grinned. "How do we get on?"

"Grasp the pommel in the right hand, cantle in the left, and place your knee against Zenobia's side," said Ahmed.

Biff did as he was told.

Ahmed went around to the other side of the camel.

"I do the same on this side," he said. "When Zenobia starts to rise, you push off with your left foot and swing that leg over the saddle as you are pulled into the air, understand?"

"Got 'er," said Biff, with his knee poised on Zenobia's side.

"Here we go," said Ahmed. He shouted a command to Zenobia, whacked her flank with the camel stick, and she heaved herself into the air—first the rear parts, then the front. Biff did as he was told, and as Zenobia's legs straightened out, he swung his leg over her and landed in the seat behind Ahmed.

"Not bad for a beginner," exclaimed Biff. He looked down at the ground. Zenobia seemed ten stories high. "A man could get airsick up here," he drawled.

"Hang on," Ahmed said and whacked Zenobia's stern. The camel lurched into motion, and they started across the yard and out the gate in the fence. Outside the fence, Ahmed reined the camel to a halt and pointed down at some tracks.

"Here is where the trail starts," said the Arab boy. "A horse came here, stood awhile, and presently was joined by a second horse. That second horse was Suji. They went off toward the south together, with the strange horse in the lead."

Biff looked down at the jumble of hoof marks and undistinguishable stompings in the sand and said, "You read all that in those marks down there?"

"I know also that the strange horse belonged to a Hambasah tribesman," said Ahmed.

"How can you tell that?" asked Biff.

"By the print of the horseshoe," said Ahmed. "It is a flat metal plate with a small hole in the center. Suji's shoe I know because I shod her myself."

Biff shook his head in admiration. "An Arab Sherlock Holmes no less. Who taught you how to track like that?"

"My grandfather," said Ahmed. "He was a Bedu and traveled the desert for many years."

"I don't see the thief's footprints down there," said Biff.

"I think he walked on the hard gravel near the fence and left none," said Ahmed. The Arab boy looked down the trail and said, "Are you ready?"

"Take off," said Biff.

Zenobia started a slow lope across the desert with Ahmed watching the trail of horses' hoofs and Biff looking at the mismatched collection of camel feet, spindle legs and knobby knees propelling them across the desert.

"What's the Arab word for *help* just in case she starts shedding parts?" Biff asked.

"She just looks clumsy," said Ahmed without turning. "You will see."

The desert was not just plain sand. There were tufts of scrub grass here and there, strips of thorn bush and a sagelike growth which dotted the landscape. As the sun rose, it glared off the quartz and gneiss crystals that lay strewn along the surface. Heat waves began to curl up from the desert floor and make the horizon undulate. It hardly seemed a place a man would come to willingly; yet Biff knew from his reading that in the spring, following the infrequent rains, the desert bloomed briefly, grass grew, and the nomads brought their flocks of sheep and goats to feed on the sparse herbiage.

They came across an occasional dry stream bed or *waddi,* as Ahmed called it. The desert was scarred with those low places where water flowed during the rare rains and where the nomads came to seek out the last slack pools of moisture before the cruel sun dried them up.

Sometimes the boys would lose the trail at these *waddis,* but Ahmed always found it and the stalk would continue. Ahmed rode with his left leg curled around the high pommel and his right foot dangling along the side of Zenobia's neck. With the foot, he signaled his orders to the camel with little nudges and taps which she seemed to understand perfectly.

They rode on in the anesthetizing heat, and the monotonous camel shuffle, the consuming silence of the desert lulled Biff into a kind of stupor. After shaking his head a couple of times to stay awake, he stretched and looked behind them. The spires of Aramco City had long since faded in the distance. He looked at his wrist watch. They had been on the trail for three hours now. But still the tracks led on.

"Biff, look!" he heard Ahmed say, pointing off to the southeast.

There, rising from the floor of the desert far ahead of them, was an undulating, liquid city of elongated buildings and a tall, tapering minaret. They could even see figures moving in the streets.

"A mirage," Biff whispered, as if speaking aloud would shatter the fragile apparition.

"We call it *Sarab* in Arabic," said Ahmed. "Travelers have followed them for hours, thinking they were just about to arrive there."

"I don't doubt it, it looks so real," said Biff. He admired the shimmering sight for a moment and with a glance at his camera, lifted it and set the controls. "Here's one authentic shot of Arabia I'll take back," he said. He snapped the picture of the mirage.

"Just in time," said Ahmed. "Look."

The mirage began to dissolve, its buildings to melt into wisps of heat and vapor; and with the toppling of the pencil-thin minaret, the vision was gone and all that lay on the horizon were the whirling dust pools.

Ahmed leaned forward with his shoulder against Zenobia's neck so as to keep his eyes on the trail. Again they lapsed into silence, too enervated by the heat to talk very much. Biff retreated within the folds of his *abbas* to seek protection from the punishing sun hanging like a white-hot coal in the sky before them.

Biff had again lapsed into a sleep doze, when he felt Ahmed rein Zenobia to a halt. He sat up and looked at the Arab boy. Ahmed was staring down at the tracks in the sand. Biff saw that the trail they had been following had converged with some new tracks.

"The two horses met some other horses and camels here," said Ahmed, "and the thief apparently joined some companions and continued on a more southeasterly course."

"How long ago?" asked Biff.

Ahmed leaned way down to examine the tracks. "Not more than an hour ago," he said.

Biff looked at the tracks incredulously. "I wish you would let me know how you can tell that," he marveled.

"The edges are still fairly firm. The wind has not had a chance to crumble them," Ahmed answered.

Again, Biff shook his head in admiration. "Some teacher, that grandfather of yours," he said.

Ahmed urged Zenobia on again and said, "My grandfather's life often depended on his tracking ability. He has told me many stories of the years when he rode with Lawrence."

"Lawrence of Arabia?" Biff asked.

"Yes. And Ibn Saud, when Saud united Arabia under his name," said Ahmed.

"I never stopped to think why it was called Saudi Arabia until you said that," said Biff. "What was it called before that?" he inquired.

"It was nothing but a desert full of warring tribes," said Ahmed. "My grandfather knew we could never become a great country until we were united as we had been in ancient times."

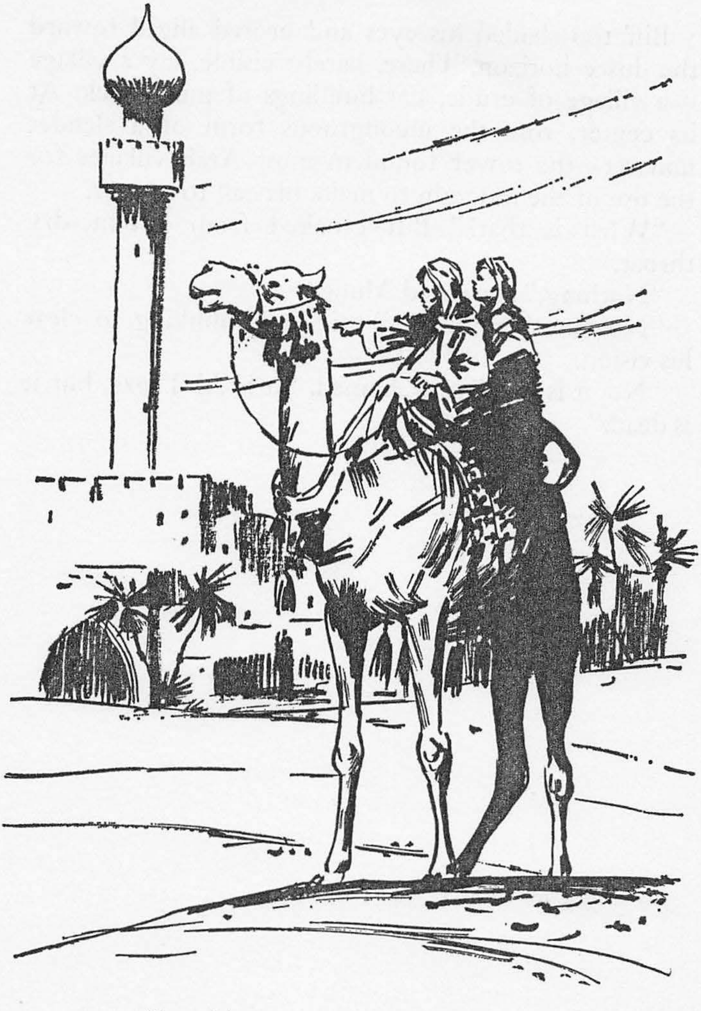
Biff heard a sort of musical tone begin to creep into Ahmed's voice, and he leaned back and listened as the young Arab lad spun a tale of his grandfather's adventures on this vast desert—of his tribe's battles to protect their grasslands and water wells against the raids of opposing tribes whose grass and wells had been burned up or dried up by the sun. He heard Ahmed rattle off the names of Al Amir al Nuri Ibn Shalan of the Ruala-Anzah and of Ali Abdul Kerim Fauz, leader of the Shamma, deadly enemies of his grandfather's tribe.

He listened to Ahmed tell of camel raids and ancient wars just as though the Arab boy had himself taken part in the battles. And as Ahmed warmed to the story, he told of the days when the Arab empire spread across the earth from India to the Atlantic Ocean and when the world trembled to the thundering hoofs of the Arab horse armies whose flashing scimitars conquered and subdued the peoples of a hundred countries.

And wherever the Arab armies went, said Ahmed, they absorbed the skills of the conquered peoples, translated their knowledge into Arabic and sent it back to the libraries of Bagdhad, where new and refined sciences of astronomy and mathematics, the arts and literature could be made available to the farthest reaches of the empire. And though the empire died, its learning remained as a monument to the Arabs of old. Only now, in the twentieth century, were the Arabs beginning to revive the old glories. With the oil discovered beneath their sands, they would rebuild their former world and once again be a power under the sun.

It was a tale full of pride and poetry, and Biff was thrilled by its telling. It had taken Ahmed fully a half hour to spin the tale, and still the trail they followed led on. The sun was almost above them now, and Biff realized they must have been on the desert for almost four hours. He started to lean forward and ask Ahmed if they were wise to continue this journey that was taking them farther and father away from home. But before he could ask the question, Ahmed held up his hand and shaded his eyes.

"Beard of the prophet!" he exclaimed.



Ahmed held up his hand and pointed

Biff too shaded his eyes and peered ahead toward the dusty horizon. There, barely visible, lay a village —a village of crude, flat buildings of mud brick. At its center, rose the incongruous form of a slender minaret—the tower found in most Arab villages for the use of the muezzin to make his call to prayer.

"What is that?" Biff croaked from a bone-dry throat.

"Nothing," answered Ahmed.

"Not another mirage," said Biff, blinking to clear his vision.

"No, it is real," said Ahmed. "It is Al Thaza, but it is dead."

CHAPTER IV

The Silent City

"I DON'T get it. Al Thaza . . . dead? What do you mean?"

"This was Al Thaza oasis," Ahmed answered. "Twenty years ago when the oil wells were drilled in this area, the underground water vein was ruptured, and the oasis dried up. The oil company paid the Hambasah tribe much money in damages since it had been their oasis for a thousand years. They moved to the north where they bought farmlands near the Euphrates River and settled there."

"Then this is the city we saw in the mirage," said Biff.

"Yes," Ahmed answered. "It happens many times that one sees a city or oasis hours before he reaches it in the desert."

"I know," said Biff, reaching back into his store of scientific knowledge. "It is because of superheated air high up in the atmosphere. It acts like a mirror and reflects a scene from one point on earth so that it can be seen from another point."

"But there was one difference in the mirage," said Ahmed, his brow creased with concern.

"What was that?" Biff inquired.

"We saw men moving in the streets," said Ahmed, staring ahead at the ghost town in the distance.

"By golly, that's right," Biff exclaimed. "You don't suppose it was our eyes playing tricks on us, do you?"

Ahmed slowly shook his head. "No," he answered, "for the tracks lead straight toward Al Thaza."

They studied the far-off scene for a long moment, and Biff said, "What now?"

Ahmed tapped Zenobia's side with the camel stick, and she sank slowly to her knees. A faint breeze at desert level brought sand swirling around them, and Ahmed said, "If they are there with Suji, they would see us coming."

"True," said Biff.

"It is a long time until night."

"Sad but true," Biff answered, squinting at the sun, still high in the sky.

"Perhaps Allah will provide a way," said Ahmed calmly. He, too, looked up at the sun. Then without a word, he slid out of the saddle and standing beside the camel, he reached into the saddle bag and withdrew a rolled-up rug. He washed his hands in clean sand, fell to his knees upon the rug and with his hands in prayerful position he bowed once toward the east—toward Mecca, birthplace of Mohammed, paused, then bowed again, this time touching his forehead to the rug. Softly he began to intone what Biff knew was an Arabic prayer. He had heard it many times since arriving in Arabia and it occurred to him that the position of the sun showed it was time for the midday prayer, one of the five daily prayers demanded of true Moslems.

Biff turned his eyes away out of respect for Ahmed and looked toward the deserted oasis of Al Thaza, faint in the distance. He wondered if the men they had followed were indeed hiding in the crumbling buildings ahead and if so, why had they come to so isolated a spot whose bubbling springs had dried up? There was apparently so little reason for anyone to come here that Ahmed had forgotten the place even existed until they had come upon it a few minutes ago.

Biff drew his *kiffieh* closer about his head as he felt the wind rise slightly and pelt his face with sand. He tucked his camera inside his *abbas* and he looked again at Ahmed, who now had finished his prayer. Biff started to say something, when he saw that Ahmed was staring back in the direction from which they had come, and he noticed a smile begin to spread over the Arab boy's face. Biff followed his gaze.

There on the northern horizon was an immense, whirling cloud of dust. It rose at least a mile into the air, hurling the sand in great whirlwinds as it moved toward them.

"Is that what I think it is?" Biff asked fearfully.

"Allah has answered my prayer." Ahmed smiled.

"Your prayer?" Biff gasped. "Isn't that a sandstorm moving our way?"

"It is," Ahmed said, looking from the advancing storm toward the oasis of Al Thaza and back toward the storm again. "We will approach the city under cover of the storm."

Biff stared at the great black whirlwind advancing on them. "I've heard those things can be pretty rough. Couldn't we lose our bearings in that?"

Ahmed patted Zenobia's side. "My camel will find the way," he said casually. "Come, let us eat and drink before the storm makes it impossible."

So saying, Ahmed reached into the rug saddle bag and withdrew a brick of dates. Breaking off a hunk, he handed it to Biff, helped himself to a portion, and returned the rest to the bag. He handed one goatskin water bag to Biff, took the other for himself and knelt down in the sand.

Then they watched the approaching sandstorm whirling its great black way across the desert toward them. The rising wind at least had the virtue of providing some relief from the searing desert heat, but just when Biff was beginning to enjoy it, he realized that its force was stirring up so much grit, he was devouring just as much sand as he was dates.

Ahmed finished his dates, then returning his water bag to the saddle pommel, he reached again into the saddle bag and withdrew a shallow dish. With his camel stick he tapped Zenobia gently on the nose three times and Biff saw her hindquarters rise into the air.

Crossing his legs and sitting in the sand, Ahmed proceeded to milk Zenobia!

Biff watched open-mouthed as Ahmed quickly filled the bowl with foaming liquid. He held the bowl out toward Biff.

Before he thought, Biff said, "No. I—er—uh . . ."

Then he remembered his father's cautioning advice concerning Arab etiquette, and he accepted the bowl from Ahmed.

Tipping it to his lips, he gave a tentative sip and tasted something quite unlike the cow's milk he had been used to all his life. This was sharp tasting and not nearly so creamy.

"You like?" asked Ahmed.

"Mmm," said Biff. "Mmm," he knew, could mean most anything in any language. He smiled and attempted to hand the rest of the milk back to Ahmed.

Ahmed made a bottoms-up motion with his hands. "It will make you strong like Zenobia," he said.

Biff swallowed the rest in two big gulps and smiled manfully as he gave the bowl back to Ahmed. The Arab boy filled the bowl once more and drained it in two big gulps—licking his lips ecstatically.

He returned the bowl to the saddle bag and proceeded to feed Zenobia some of the dates and some sprigs of leaves and thorn-bush buds which he had been carrying in the saddle bag.

Biff watched Zenobia roll back her soft upper lip and bare her long, yellow teeth to devour them.

"I'd hate to have her decide *I* was something to eat," Biff drawled.

Zenobia turned and looked at Biff as though she had understood what he had said. She worked her double-lidded eyes in a kind of wink and batted her long eyelashes at him.

"Is she flirting with me?" Biff asked.

Ahmed laughed and patted Zenobia's nose. With a swift move she reached up and nipped at him with her long fangs. Ahmed drew his hand back hastily and waved a scolding finger at Zenobia.

"What'd I tell you," Biff chortled. "Once a camel always a camel."

The Arab boy shrugged. "So be it," he said. He looked toward the advancing storm and said, "It is time to be ready. Come, everything must be tied on tight so we do not lose it."

They fastened all loose things tightly to the saddle, and as they did, they could feel the force of the approaching storm begin to close in on them. Ahmed mounted first, then Biff. And the storm swept over them.

"They will never see us in this," Ahmed shouted, and Zenobia began to move forward, her back to the onrushing wind.

Biff pulled his *kiffieh* tight across his nose and face and drew the hood of his *abbas* around his head so that only a thin slit was left for vision. Even at that he could feel the sting of the sand and when he licked his lips, he realized they were dried and beginning to crack. His hands were red and chapped from the dry, abrasive wind howling about them. Peeking out from beneath his hood, he realized he couldn't even see the ground on which Zenobia was walking.

"I've heard of flying blind, but this is ridiculous," Biff shouted, knowing that Ahmed couldn't possibly hear him.

He could just barely see Ahmed hunched on the saddle in front of him and realized how lucky they were that they had seen the trail heading for Al Thaza before the sandstorm arrived, else the tracks would have been wiped out completely. In addition, the storm was affording them a chance to get close to the oasis without being observed.

Zenobia's slow shuffle was completely muffled by the howling wind, but she never wavered or changed speed. Biff's grudging admiration for the prehistoric-looking beast rose a couple of notches. Of all God's creatures, surely the camel was the most completely adapted to its environment of any on the face of the earth. He couldn't imagine anything made by God or man which could navigate in this blizzard of stinging sand as Zenobia was doing now. He sent up a silent prayer also for the *abbas* with which Ahmed had so thoughtfully provided him. He shuddered at the thought of the mess he would be in had he worn his American-style clothes, so ill-adapted to a desert existence.

Biff sensed rather than felt a change in Zenobia's stride. It was slowing. He leaned forward and saw Ahmed peek out from his *abbas* and attempt to nudge Zenobia back into high gear. The camel, however, had ideas of her own and gradually slowed to a halt.

Ahmed looked back at Biff and shook his head questioningly. When it was obvious Zenobia did not intend to go on, Ahmed shrugged his shoulders, leaned over, and tapped Zenobia across the knees. Slowly, she sank to the ground—first her forelegs, then her rear. Ahmed slid off and ducked behind the camel's huge bulk so as to use the animal as a windguard. Biff joined him. The Arab lad peeked out from his *abbas* and Biff saw that his face was covered with grime so thick that it made it appear he was wearing goggles.

"I do not know why she stopped," Ahmed shouted above the roar of the sandstorm, "but I shall trust her judgment."

"I'm with you," Biff yelled back.

Ahmed looked up at Zenobia, who was unconcernedly chewing her cud. Her double eyelids had spread a thin film across her eyeballs to protect them from the flying sand. He looked back at Biff and with a smile, said, "Do you like camels?"

"She's got me convinced," Biff answered, looking at Zenobia's aloof expression. "But if you think she needs to be petted, I'll let *you* do it."

Ahmed laughed again and looking at Zenobia, said something in Arabic. Biff could have sworn the camel gave an answering grunt.

"What'd you say, and what'd she answer?" Biff inquired.

"I asked her, where is Suji?" said Ahmed soberly.

"And what did Zenobia say?" Biff asked.

"Grandfather says, if camels could talk, we would be carrying the loads and they would be carrying the camel sticks," said Ahmed.

Biff laughed and took a look outside his *abbas*. "Say," he said, "I think the storm has almost passed us by."

Ahmed took a peek outside his *kiffieh* and then rose slowly to look over Zenobia's hump. Suddenly, he stood straight up and exclaimed explosively, "Bloomers!"

"What?" Biff laughed.

"Didn't you say that was an American expression of surprise?" asked Ahmed.

"Oh, yeah—I did, didn't I?" Biff chuckled.

"Well, I am surprised," said Ahmed.

"At what?" asked Biff, rising to stand beside the Arab lad.

"Look," said Ahmed. "Zenobia stopped us just in time."

Biff squinted through the whirling dust, thinned now somewhat from what it had been at the height of the storm's fury.

There, looming no more than fifty yards away, were the mud-brick walls and the minaret of Al Thaza, silent and deserted.

CHAPTER V

Up a Tree

"QUICKLY!" snapped Ahmed. "We must find hiding so we cannot be seen if there is anyone within those walls." He spat a command at Zenobia, and she climbed complainingly to her feet.

"Behind the dune there!" Ahmed said, pointing to a high wall of drifted sand about fifteen yards ahead. He grasped Zenobia's halter, and together they hurried to a spot behind the dune where again the Arab lad ordered her to hunker down in the sand. The camel sank to her knees with a tired groan.

"Now what?" Biff inquired.

"If they are in the oasis, they are pinned down by the storm. When it is over, they will come out. But before then, we must find a way to see if they are there."

Biff looked up at the tall minaret on the edge of the oasis. This was the tower used by the muezzin in every Arab town to call the faithful to prayer. It was customarily the tallest structure in any village as it was here.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Biff asked.

"I believe so." Ahmed smiled. "Follow me." He patted Zenobia on the nose with the camel stick, whispered some soothing Arabic words to her, darted around the dune and headed for the minaret.

Biff scrambled after the Arab boy and running low, they soon reached the base of the pencil-shaped structure. The minaret tapered as it reached a point and just below the top, there was a balcony completely around it. Small, square windows faced out on the balcony, but there seemed to be no stairs to it.

"The stairs are inside," said Ahmed. "Come." He led the way around the base as if looking for a door inside. The door was on the side toward the main village and was covered almost halfway up with drifting sand. They tugged at it for a moment but soon realized that they could be seen by anyone who might be within the oasis if they tarried too long, so they scurried back behind the minaret.

"*Kismet*," said Ahmed.

Biff recognized the Arabic word for "fate." He looked up toward the top of the tower and as he did, noticed that some of the mud bricks projected from the unevenly built walls.

"Could we scramble up on the ends of the bricks?" he asked, pointing to some of the lower ones.

Ahmed examined them and nodded.

"Let an old Tibetan mountain climber go first," said Biff, recalling his Himalayan adventures in the MYS-

TERY OF THE TIBETAN CARAVAN. He grabbed at the first of the bricks, put his foot on another, and began to scramble up the side of the minaret.

He could hear Ahmed right behind him as they clawed their way up the sheer surface, inch by inch. Gradually they made progress and within a minute or two, Biff's hand grasped the edge of the balcony, and he hauled himself over its rail. He held a hand down to assist Ahmed and together they stood on the balcony, the last vestiges of the sandstorm whirling about them.

"Allah has been good," said Ahmed.

Biff took a deep breath to get his wind and said, "Mmm, what is that I smell?"

Ahmed's brow creased. "I, too, smell something," he murmured.

Biff sniffed again. "It's coming from inside this minaret," he said, turning toward one of the tiny windows opening on the balcony. He stuck his head close to the opening and sniffed. Ahmed did the same.

As one, they said, "Oil!"

Biff stared at Ahmed, then thrust his head inside the small window and tried to see down inside the minaret. It was pitch black.

"I can't see a thing," he said. "That's definitely oil we smell, but I guess we'd better take care of first things first. We came up here to look the town over and see if we could find Suji. Why don't we do that and worry about this later?"

"Quite so," said Ahmed. He peered around the curve of the minaret and dropping to his stomach, led the way to a point where they could survey the oasis of Al Thaza.

The buildings were of mud brick, much like the material from which the minaret was made. They were blocky and unimaginative in design; but except where construction had been faulty, there had been very little deterioration in the village. Nothing rotted in the desert. Only the erosion of wind-driven sand worked to destroy buildings here. Many of the roofs had fallen in during the twenty years the oasis had been deserted. With the whole desert for room, the village had been built with the narrowest of streets, probably for shade. The overhanging Arab porches projected from every second story and in many, the latticework was still there, torn loose and flapping in the wind, evidence of the Arab custom of sequestering their womenfolk away from public gaze, but catering to the world-wide penchant of the ladies to want to know what was going on around them.

But nowhere was there a sign of life. They saw no tethered animals, no evidence that there had been anyone in this place in all the twenty long years since the Hambasah tribe had deserted it after the oasis had dried up.

"The tracks led to here," Ahmed murmured.

"The storm wiped those out," Biff answered. "And if anyone left here, the storm destroyed those tracks too."

"And ours also, Allah be praised," said Ahmed, glancing back in the direction from which they had come.

"Of course, they could be inside one of these houses," said Biff.

"But if they are not here, we would be losing time watching empty buildings," said Ahmed.

"I don't know any other way to do it," said Biff. "If we go rummaging around in those buildings, we may stir up something we're not equipped to handle."

Ahmed rested his chin on his fist and peered through the rungs of the balcony. "It is indeed odd that any of the Hambasah tribe should be here at the old oasis. The whole tribe left here before I was born."

"Were they known as horse thieves?" Biff asked.

"Every tribe was in the old days," said Ahmed casually.

"Old days?" Biff asked. "What do you mean by old?"

"Before Ibn Saud organized the tribes and made laws against the old blood feuds," said Ahmed. "In the 1920's."

"What were these blood feuds I've always heard about?" Biff asked.

"That is what Ibn Saud asked some of the tribal leaders," said Ahmed. "*They* said it was traditional for the Billi to war with the Juheina and the Ateiba with the Ageyl—they resented his tampering with tribal tradition."

"How did he convince them?"

"He asked the older *sheikhs* what the reasons were for the various feuds and was told that some had begun a thousand years before—so long ago that not the wisest among them could tell what had started the feuds in the beginning. He pointed out to them how ridiculous it was to base tradition on such grounds.

Then he attacked the clan system." Ahmed rolled his eyes heavenward to indicate the upheaval this had caused.

"What is the clan system?" Biff asked.

"Tribes organized into clans. This permitted tribes to continue raiding each others' camels and horses, but if they were members of the same clan, they could not kill. Only if a tribe was outside their own clan was it considered permissible to kill."

"What if in one of these friendly little family raids, somebody got killed by accident?" Biff asked.

"Then blood money was exacted," said Ahmed.

"Blood money. I've heard that expression but never knew what it meant," said Biff.

"The murderer was forced to pay money and livestock to the family of the murdered man, the amount depending upon his title and standing in his tribe."

"So that's where the expression came from," Biff murmured.

"It is only one of many words English has borrowed from Arabic," said Ahmed. "Algebra, admiral, magazine, sofa, cotton, coffee, sugar, sheriff—"

"I wish we had one with us right now—with a big, long six-gun so he could give us a little help in case Suji is in there with those horsemen somewhere," said Biff.

Ahmed stared through the balcony rungs toward the silent village spread out below them. "The storm is almost over. I do not understand why they have not come out—if they are here."

Biff looked down at the buildings.

"I say let's wait five more minutes, then—" But he never finished what he had begun, for suddenly they heard a distressed bleating from somewhere behind them. It was an animal sound; one which Biff had never heard before, but Ahmed had.

"Zenobia!" he gasped.

Again the high, distressed bleat sounded across the desert.

"She'll give us away!" Ahmed groaned.

Almost as he spoke, there came a sudden, answering whinny from the direction of the village. The boys turned just in time to see a flash of gold dash out of one of the houses. No mistaking this animal. It was a beautiful, golden horse, his nostrils aquiver, mane flying in the breeze. He stopped transfixed for a moment, head held high, as though searching for the sound of the camel bleat.

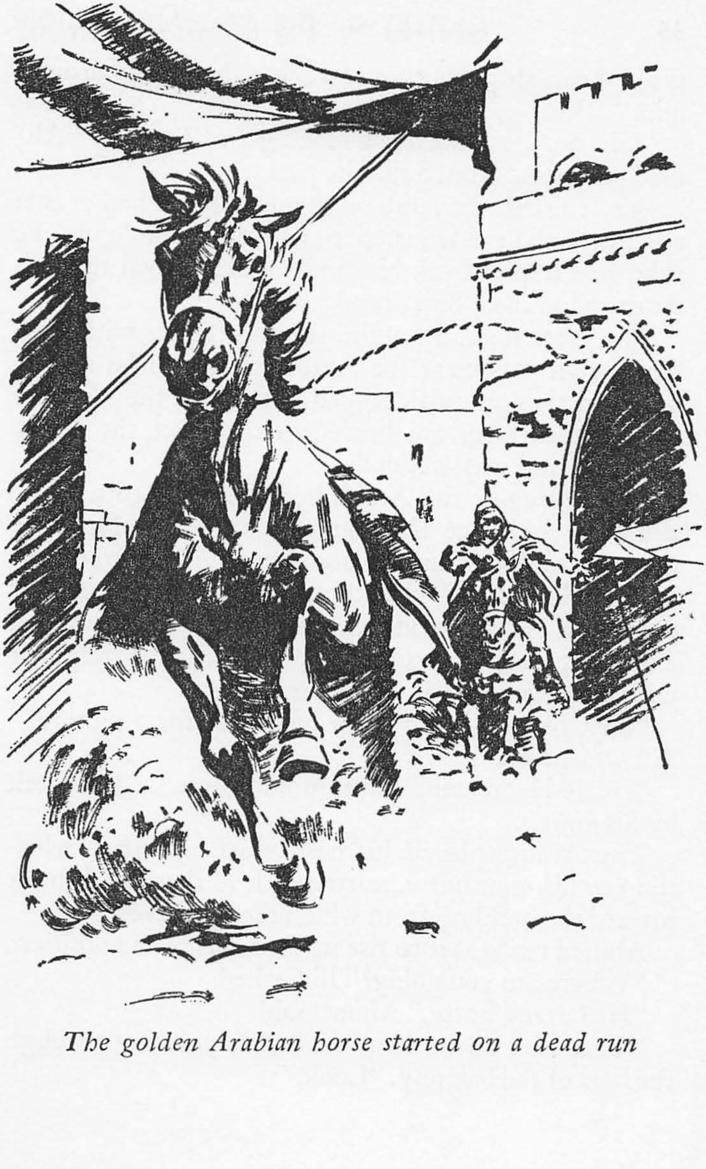
"Suji!" Ahmed gasped.

The golden Arabian horse rose high on his hind legs, pawing the air, and with a great lunge started on a dead run down the old main street of Al Thaza, straight toward the minaret in which they were hiding.

Ahmed started to rise to his feet, but in a flash Biff had grabbed him by the scruff of his *abbas* and yanked him back. Not a moment too soon! For galloping out the door of the same house came an Arab on a gray horse, and he took off in pursuit of Suji.

"Run, Suji, run!" Ahmed croaked.

For about twenty yards the golden stallion did run, but suddenly, as the horse reached the base of the minaret, they saw his front legs stiffen, and Suji



The golden Arabian horse started on a dead run ground to a stop, his eyes searching the terrain around him.

"Oh, no. . . . no. He's looking for Zenobia!" Ahmed groaned. "Run, Suji!" he pleaded.

But in a flash the Arab on the gray horse had drawn abreast of the golden stallion, and with one lunge the rider had leaped from his saddle and grabbed the halter dangling from Suji's head.

The great stallion fought, pawing the air with both feet, but it was clear the Arab was not to be shaken off. And though Suji dragged him about the sand for a minute or two, the horseman soon got the upper hand and Suji was subdued.

In the struggle the Arab's headdress had torn loose, and Biff could see the man's face clearly. His eyes were almost black and his nose long, with a prominent bridge. He had high cheekbones, and his jet-black hair was worn in two braids which fell over his shoulders. To Biff's delight, around his waist was a red belt with a real dagger hanging from it.

"Boy, oh boy—you think he'd pose for a picture?" Biff whispered.

"He is Hambasah," murmured Ahmed. "I can tell by his *kiffieh*."

The Arab replaced his head scarf and after whistling to his own horse, started to lead them both back toward the building from which they had come.

Ahmed made as if to rise up from his prone position.

"Where are you going?" Biff asked.

"He has my horse," Ahmed said.

"That isn't all he has," said Biff, pointing through the bars of the balcony. "Look."

There, coming out of the building the man had just left, were three similarly clad Arabs.

Ahmed sank down on his stomach again. Biff peered through the bars and said, "Now what's he doing?"

The Arab with the two horses had stopped as though he had seen or heard something off toward the north. The boys couldn't tell what it might be since their vision was obstructed in that direction. Suddenly, they saw the rider signal to the other three Arabs to get back inside. The three men disappeared.

Then the Arab turned and faced toward the northeast, and dimly the boys heard a sound which seemed out of place here in the middle of the desert. It was the sound of a car engine.

They squirmed along the balcony to look in the direction of the Arab's gaze.

When they did, they saw an odd sight. It was a Cadillac with the oversized tires used for desert travel, and it was heading straight for the minaret in which they were hiding.

"We are slowly but surely getting outnumbered," said Biff.

CHAPTER VI

Choice of Chances

THE luxurious car sped across the desert straight toward the oasis, stirring a dust storm in its wake. It was a black car of the deluxe kind favored by so many of the oil-rich *sheikhs* of the desert, and the boys could see, by peeking through the rungs of their hiding place, that the windshield was tinted green to protect the occupants from the glare of the fierce middle-eastern sun.

The Arab seemed unperturbed by the appearance of the car, and it was clear he must have expected its arrival. He walked slowly toward the base of the minaret in order to take advantage of the shade, and finally stopped almost immediately below the perch on which the boys lay.

They watched the car roar toward them, and with a great cloud of dust, it rolled to a stop right beneath them. The windows of the car were rolled up, indicating it was air-conditioned. The motor of the Cadillac stopped, and they heard the window roll down. The Arab stepped toward the car, still leading the two horses, and spoke a greeting in Arabic. An answering voice returned the greeting and the door of the Cadillac swung open. A tall figure in expensive silk *abbas*, red and black *kiffieh* and an ornate ropen *ighal* crowning his head, stepped from the car. They could not see the face of the driver because of their height and the fact that his head shawl was pulled close about his face. Too, he wore colored glasses. He spoke a few more words to the Arab with the horses, and Ahmed whispered, "He asks if this man has finished his job."

"What job, I wonder?" Biff retorted.

Ahmed put his finger to his lips and strained to hear more of what was going on below.

A few more words were passed between the two men, and then Biff saw them look toward the base of the minaret. His heart gave a little leap. They were heading toward the door of the tower.

"He says he wants to see the job," Ahmed whispered.

It was at that moment they heard the wrenching of wood below and realized the two men were pulling the door open against the drifted sand.

The two boys looked at each other and knew that this was their chance to learn what had puzzled them from the moment they arrived—the source of the oily smell within the tower.

Ahmed nodded toward one of the windows, and slowly they began to squirm along the floor of the balcony.

"The window on the side away from the village," Biff whispered. "So those other three Arabs won't see us."

Ahmed nodded, and they continued to crawl until they had reached the other side of the tower. Then slowly they rose so they could look through one of the openings. For a moment, they saw only pitch blackness, but suddenly the inside of the minaret was lit by bright sunlight as the two men below wrenched the door open.

Inch by inch, the boys poked their heads through the opening until they could look down inside.

The two men stood in the shaft of sunlight coming through the door. The one in the white *abbas* was a step in advance of the other, and he stopped to examine a bulky object in the center of the floor.

It seemed to be oil-field equipment of some kind—a drill, perhaps, but there were none of the usual things that went along with a drill—no derrick, no drill stem. It was unlike any oil-field drill either of them had ever seen.

The boys stared at each other. Each knew that Aramco had no oil equipment in this location. And if anyone else did, it was strictly against the law. In this entire region, the Saudi-Arabian government allowed only one company any oil rights—Aramco. Any others were interlopers and thieves.

The boys turned back to look at the scene below; and after an examination of the strange drill, the man in the white *abbas* returned to the side of the other Arab. He said something in Arabic and squatted down. Then, with his finger, he began to make a rude sketch in the sand. It was of irregular shape, somewhat like an ink blot, it seemed to Biff, and as the man spoke to the other Arab, he poked at the sand sketch with his forefinger, first on one side, then another and then a third, finishing up with a stab at this third location on what seemed to be a crude map.

A sudden idea leaped into Biff's mind. He made a quick estimate of the distance to the scene below, adjusted his lens and shutter settings, slowly leaned out with his camera to his eye and aimed at the figures squatted at the map below.

"What are you doing?" Ahmed asked frantically, tugging at Biff's garment.

"Making a record of that little map he's drawing," Biff whispered. He aimed so as to get a picture of the equipment and the white-robed figure pointing at the sketch. An expensive wrist watch on the man's wrist glinted as Biff snapped the shutter.

"Just in time," Ahmed said, pointing below.

The white-robed figure who had drawn the crude map rose and with his foot, erased what he had drawn. Then the two men walked to the door and left the minaret. A moment later, the light was shut off as the door was slammed shut.

The boys dropped back on their stomachs and once more slid back to their positions on the balcony, just above the car and the two horses below. The horses had been loosely tethered to the bumper of the Cadillac by the Arab, and as the two men returned from within the minaret, the white-robed man glanced at Suji and said something.

"He's asking where the man got such a handsome horse," Ahmed whispered.

The boys listened as the Arab reached up and stroked Suji's head. He was apparently explaining something to the man in white which was rather complicated, for he gesticulated and pointed south a couple of times.

"What's going on? What's he saying?" Biff whispered.

"He says his mare—the other horse there—disappeared last night and when she returned, she had Suji with her."

"Good story. . . . if true," Biff drawled.

"Apparently the one in white does not think so," said Ahmed. "Look."

The man in white had doubled up his fist and was shaking it in the Arab's face. He was obviously angry for he spat the Arabic words out and suddenly, he drew back his hand as if to strike the man standing by the horses. The Arab's hand flew to the hilt of his dagger and there the two men froze.

"The white-robed Arab accuses him of stealing Suji," Ahmed whispered.

The boys watched the figure in white silk slowly relax and when he spoke, his voice had a more conciliatory tone. Ahmed listened for a moment and then translated for Biff.

"He says he does not object to this man doing a little horse stealing on his own time, but not during so important a project as Operation Midraak," Ahmed whispered.

"What does that mean?" Biff asked.

Ahmed shook his head and put his finger to his lips as he strained to hear what the men were now saying.

The man in white was pointing to the horse, then motioning south. They saw the dark-clad Arab shake his head and grasp the reins more firmly.

"The man with the Cadillac wants him to get rid of Suji somehow. He says it could lead to trouble. It might bring the owners after it. They might see things they shouldn't."

"He can say that again," Biff chuckled.

The Hambasah was standing with the reins in hand, his jaw clamped stubbornly shut. It was clear he meant to keep Suji.

For a moment the two men below stared at each other. Finally, the man in the white *abbas* made a gesture as if to conclude the matter. He mumbled a few words which Ahmed could just barely hear.

"He told the man to keep the horse but to keep it out of sight," Ahmed whispered.

Murmuring a few more words, the white-robed man bowed, touched fingers to forehead and heart, and ducked into his Cadillac.

"He says he is heading for Madyab and that the Hambasah is to go on to Rhamadan as instructed."

"Madyab. . . . Rhamadan? Where are they?" asked Biff.

"Madyab is an oasis about three hours to the east. Rhamadan is the ninth month of the Arabic calendar."

The Cadillac below roared to life, stirring up a cloud of dust around it. The boys watched it make a tight circle and then straighten out and speed toward the east. The Hambasah with the two horses watched the Cadillac for a moment, then spat in its direction and started walking back toward the village.

Silently, the boys watched the Hambasah tribesman approach the mud-walled house from which he had exited a few minutes ago. When he had disappeared inside, Biff heaved a deep sigh and said, "Now, my friend, let's get down out of this tower. I'd hate to be up here if Zenobia began hollering for Suji again."

"True," said Ahmed, starting to crawl along the far side of the balcony. "I am surprised, in fact, that the Hambasah did not wonder what caused Suji to break loose from them."

"Maybe only Suji heard, or maybe in the excitement of his little argument with the guy in the Cadillac, it slipped his mind," said Biff, "But let's get in a little better strategic position." He threw his leg over the edge of the balcony and led the way down the side of the minaret, brick by brick, just as they had climbed it.

When they reached the base of the tower, they crouched and began to run toward a low-lying dune about twenty-five yards away, keeping the tower between themselves and the building in which the Arabs had taken shelter. They were breathing hard when they reached it. Looking back toward the village, they saw the tall Hambasah emerge. This time he was leading his gray mare and riding Suji. Close behind him were the three other Arabs. They were leading some horses and camels out of the building. The camels appeared to be pack animals upon whose backs the boys could see some wooden boxes.

"They're getting ready to take off, praise Allah," said Biff, unconsciously slipping into Ahmed's Moslem speech mannerism.

"And with them goes my Suji," said Ahmed softly.

"Leaving us with a three-pronged dilemma," said Biff.

Ahmed looked questioningly toward Biff. It was clear he wasn't sure what the word meant.

"Dilemma—puzzle, problem," Biff explained. "We can either follow the guys with your horse, follow the guy in the Cadillac and find out what this mechanism in the minaret is all about, or run home to papa and dump the whole business in his lap."

"The first, we cannot do," said Ahmed.

"But we came to find your horse," said Biff. "If they head into that desert with him, you might never see Suji again."

"I know," said Ahmed, a mist flooding his eyes, "but it is clear this device in the minaret could have something to do with the oil-field pressure problem our fathers have been working on. Knowing this, I could not be selfish and worry only about my horse."

"Sure, I know that," said Biff. "Okay, why not get back to Aramco City, tell our dads what we've seen, and then try to pick up the trail of these Arabs here tomorrow?"

Ahmed bit his lip, studying the problem, but before he could answer, they were horrified by a high, whinnying bleat from a dune a few yards beyond them.

It was Zenobia. She was calling to Suji again, and when they looked back toward the village, they could see that the horse had heard the call. But so had the Hambasah and the Arabs. They were looking toward the place where the boys were hiding.

CHAPTER VII

Hare and Hounds

"OH, my aching *kiffieh!*" Biff yelped. "She *would* have to open her snoot!"

"Come," said Ahmed, rising and yanking at Biff's sleeve. "We must get to Zenobia and try to escape."

"Don't slow down!" Biff shouted, "or I may run over you."

Together they took off in a sprawling, pell-mell flight across the soft sand toward the dune where Ahmed had tethered Zenobia. Biff looked back and saw that they had been detected. One of the Arabs was pointing at them and they were leaping to their horses —a black, a gray, a white, and Suji.

The boys arrived at the spot where Zenobia sat hunkered in the sand with the same unconcerned expression on her face that she had worn through 110-degree heat and a choking sandstorm.

"Start your motor, honey!" shouted Biff as he slid to a stop beside her.

Zenobia gave him a bored look and hardly deigned to notice Ahmed as he arrived.

"Get ready to mount!" the Arab boy yelled as he untied the camel.

"Oh, yeah," cried Biff, placing a knee against Zenobia's side and grasping pommel and cantle in his hands. "I hope I get this right!"

Ahmed looked over at Biff and said, "Ready?"

"Blast off!" Biff answered.

Ahmed shouted a command at Zenobia. The camel lurched into the air, and when Biff felt himself being dragged upward, he pushed off with his free foot and flung it over the saddle. But he discovered too late that he had made a slight technical error. In the excitement he had landed in the saddle facing backwards!

"Oh NO!" he hollered. But it was too late to remedy the error now. Zenobia was in full flight across the desert. Biff twisted halfway around and shouted to Ahmed, "Would you mind reading those directions again?"

Ahmed looked back, did a double take, and Biff could have sworn he heard a snicker.

"Well, I'll say one thing," Biff shouted. "I've got a great seat for the chase!"

As indeed he did. He had a full view of the Arab horsemen in full gallop, making straight across the sand after them and gaining with every stride.

"Can't you shift this camel into high?" Biff yelled. "We are a very temporary first right now!"

He felt Ahmed's arm swing back and whack Zenobia across the flanks with his camel stick. The effect was magical. The huge beast accelerated with such a sudden burst that Biff was almost catapulted over her bony shanks. Zenobia stretched out and began to fairly fly across the sand.

"Attaboy!" Biff shouted. "That's what I call running!"

And run Zenobia did. Had he not been witnessing it, Biff wouldn't have believed such speed possible from so ungainly a beast.

"I take back ninety-nine per cent of what I said about camels!" he shouted.

"Are they gaining?" Ahmed asked.

"Not much," Biff answered.

"I'm afraid we may be too heavy for her," shouted the Arab boy.

"What can we do?" Biff asked.

"Pray to Allah," said Ahmed.

Biff watched the charging Arabs closely, and he saw that Ahmed was right. The horses were slowly gaining on them as Zenobia began to feel the strain of the weight she was carrying.

Ahmed whacked Zenobia's flanks, but the extra speed just wasn't there, and now Biff could see the sweat shining on the faces of the three Arabs as they drew closer and closer. The black and white and gray horses were in the lead with Suji close off the pace. Biff looked around frantically for something to heave at them and his eye fell on the saddle bags. He reached inside the left-hand bag and felt the remains of the dates he and Ahmed had eaten for lunch. He withdrew the hard date brick and looked back at the closest Arab. Taking slow aim, he drew back his pitching arm and heaved it at the Bedouin's head. It was a perfect strike and hit the flying nomad between the eyes. The man swayed in the saddle from the force of the blow but shook his head and recovered quickly. Lashing his horse, he closed the gap even more.

Biff was searching in the saddle bag for more ammunition. He felt the pan which Ahmed had used to milk Zenobia and yanked it from the bag. Again, he took aim and scaled it toward the charging horsemen. He moaned as he saw it sail harmlessly over their heads, but he yelled with delight as the pan curved like a boomerang, and on its return trip, hit one of the Bedouins in the ear.

"I'm annoying them anyway!" Biff yelled, diving into the bag for more ammunition. But soon, he discovered his bags were empty and the nearest horseman was close enough for him to touch. And just to make things more ticklish, he saw that the man had a wickedly curved dagger in his hand. Biff made a desperate grab at the saddle bag, and as the Arab on the black horse thundered up beside him, he swung it at the fellow's head. The swing missed and to Biff's horror, the Arab lashed out with the curved dagger and sliced the saddle bag in the middle as neatly as a knife through hot butter. Biff rose in the saddle and threw the remains at the man, who dodged and laughed.

"It won't be long now!" Biff yelled at Ahmed, grabbing for the second saddle bag. The Arab on the white horse had raced alongside them now, and Biff knew that time was running out. The horseman was leaning over as though to grab Zenobia's saddle. As he did, Biff swung with the saddle bag and hit him across the face. The Arab hardly flinched from the blow. He reached up, jerked the bag from Biff's hand and sent it sailing out into the desert. In the next instant, the Arab had whipped out his dagger and leaning out of the saddle, he started swiping at Zenobia's side.

"He is trying to cut the saddle cinch!" Ahmed shouted.

Biff kicked at the man's hand but once more the blade flashed. The swipe missed the cinch, but it made a clean hit on the water bag. Spewing water, the waterskin disgorged its contents and hung limply on the saddle. As the Arab on the other side of Zenobia saw this, he drew his own knife. He had an evil leer on his face and Biff sensed that instead of trying for the cinch, he was going to puncture the water bag on his side. With one swipe, the Arabs sliced open the skin and out came the water. The boys could hear the Bedouin howl with delight.

Zenobia was really straining now, her sides heaving with the exertion of the chase. Biff looked back and saw that the Hambasah astride Suji was merely galloping along, watching the show. He apparently thought his companions would soon bring them to a halt and was simply waiting to take over. Suddenly, Biff heard a cry from Ahmed. "*Allah Akbar!*" the Arab boy shouted. "A *waddi*—this will slow them down!"

Biff hardly had time to turn around when he heard the sound of Zenobia's galloping feet change in tone. He looked down and saw that they had left the sandy desert and had entered a stretch of gravelly, dry stream bed. The pebbles flew from beneath the camel's padded feet, and Biff heard Ahmed shout encouragement to Zenobia. As he turned around, Biff saw that the two horsemen who had been galloping along beside them, had suddenly dropped back. Their horses were slowing up, and in another moment, he saw the white horse begin to limp and then the black horse did the same. Their galloping strides changed to sore-footed trots and they fell farther and farther behind.

"Yippee!" hollered Biff. "They've gone lame."

"Where is Suji?" Ahmed shouted.

"Coming fast. And he's not lame!" Biff answered.

"Good!"

"What's good about it?" Biff yelled. "You should see the sausage cutter this Hambasah is waving!"

The sun shone on the jewelled handle of the Hambasah's scimitar as he held it high above his head and thundered toward them with Suji's great strides gobbling up the distance between them. Zenobia, it was clear, had little run left in her. Her strides were getting shorter and choppier, and it wouldn't be long before her race would be over.

"Where now?" shouted Ahmed.

"At your right elbow!" Biff answered.

Ahmed turned right and there indeed was the Hambasah horseman, his scimitar held high, his left hand reaching out to grasp Zenobia's halter and jerk her to a stop.

But at that precise moment, Ahmed rose to his knees on the saddle and placing his fingers in his mouth blew a shrill whistle. For a moment the Hambasah stared at the strange action, but in the next instant his head snapped back as with a sudden jerk, Suji cleared the ground in a great bucking leap. He came down with all four legs stiffened, and hit the ground with a jar. Before the Hambasah could regain his balance, the stallion arched his back and left the ground again, proceeding to flip the astonished Hambasah high into the air where he turned over once and came down on the hard-packed gravel. He rolled over and lay still.

Suji gave a high whinny and with a last disdainful look at the recumbent Arab, turned and took off after Zenobia and her two passengers. In a half dozen strides, he pulled up alongside the staggering camel and together, they trotted along the *waddi*, neighing and wheezing greetings at each other.

Ahmed kept the animals moving for about another mile to make sure they were far away from all pursuit. Then with a tug on the reins, he brought the gallant Zenobia to a stop.

Ahmed's eyes were fastened on Suji, and as the Arabian stallion rose high on his hind legs and whinnied again, Biff had the feeling that he was about to see a boy cry over a horse for the second time in one day.

CHAPTER VIII

Water Haul

TEARS streaming down his face, Ahmed slid off Zenobia's back and, with a whoop, threw his arms around the neck of the beautiful stallion. His English deserted him, but Biff knew by the tone of the Arab boy's voice that he was showering Suji with tender Arabic endearments. When he had gained control of himself, Ahmed led the panting horse over to Zenobia, and to Biff's great joy, he saw the mighty reserve of the haughty camel melt as she swung her long neck down and planted a great, wet lick on Suji's nose.

"Okay, okay, break it up!" Biff called from where he was still sitting, high in the camel saddle.

Ahmed looked up at him with an embarrassed smile. "Please excuse," he said.

"It's all right with me," said Biff, shading his eyes and looking back in the direction from which they had fled. "As long as our Bedouin buddies don't get their second wind and interrupt you."

He stared into the haze for a long minute, but there was no sign of pursuit. The dust had settled. The chase was over. He threw his leg over the saddle and slid to the ground beside Ahmed.

"Would you mind telling me how you knew you'd lose that bunch when the horses hit the gravel?" Biff asked.

"They are Kuhaylan horses from the Nafud Desert in North Arabia. Their hoofs are soft because they run in sand most of their lives. They do not wear shoes. I knew the gravel would stick in their tender hoofs and make them go lame."

"But how about the bucking bronco act Suji put on when you whistled at him?" asked Biff.

"I taught him this," said Ahmed. "I was afraid so valuable a horse might be a temptation to thieves, and I wanted this trick as protection."

"I think you could get a testimonial from that Hambasah on how good a trick it was," Biff chuckled.

"I was fearful Suji might have forgotten," said Ahmed, tenderly wiping foam from the horse's neck with the edge of his *abbas*. "But he remembered and saved us from—well, who knows?"

"*I* don't know, but the way those guys chased us away from that minaret, I could make a pretty good guess." Biff heaved a deep sigh and glanced at the empty camel saddle and the two exhausted animals standing spraddle-legged in the dusty *waddi.*

"Only I am beginning to wonder if we would have been any worse off in their hands than we are now. We seem to be out of water, out of food, and practically out of transportation."

"Water is our first concern," said Ahmed.

Biff licked his dry lips and croaked, "You can say that again."

Ahmed looked puzzled and repeated, "Water is our first concern."

"No, no." Biff laughed. " 'You-can-say-that-again' is just an American slang term."

"Oh—like bloomers," said Ahmed.

"Er—yeah," said Biff, wondering if his leg was being pulled. "But about the water. How do we handle that problem?"

Ahmed walked up the side of the *waddi* and when he had reached the edge, he surveyed the desert in all directions. He glanced at the sun, whose position showed it was midafternoon; then turned his back on it and stared toward the east. "We must go that way," he said.

"What's that way?" Biff asked.

"Madyab," said Ahmed.

"You mean the town the guy in the Cadillac was talking about," asked Biff.

"Yes, it is an oasis—about three hours ride."

"Is that closer than Aramco City?"

"Yes. Aramco is at least five hours away—perhaps more, with the animals in their present condition. Neither they nor we could stand it without water." He turned and looked back toward the east. "Madyab is our best chance."

"Chance for what—water or a crack at solving the big minaret mystery?" Biff asked slyly.

"A chance for survival," said Ahmed, without smiling.

"You're the captain," said Biff. "Madyab it is. Only I sure don't relish another three-hour ride in this sun . . . and without water."

"We cannot start now in any event," said Ahmed, returning to the floor of the *waddi.* "We must rest the animals. By the time we leave, the sun will be lower and will not increase our thirst so much."

They led Suji and Zenobia to the slight shadow beginning to form along the west bank of the *waddi*, and when the two animals had taken their positions, end to end, the boys dropped to the ground; with Biff bracing his back against Zenobia and Ahmed leaning against Suji. Biff sighed and stared at the dry thorn bushes and dead grass clinging to the floor of the *waddi.*

"I don't believe this place ever saw a drop of water," he croaked.

Ahmed chuckled and said, "In spring this *waddi* sometimes fills to overflowing and all about here grass grows and the Bedouins bring their flocks of sheep and goats to graze."

Biff looked up at the clear blue sky. "Do they ever have an out-of-season shower?"

Ahmed smiled and said, "It helps not to think of water."

"What do you suggest I think about?" Biff held up his hand. "Don't tell me. I know. That mechanism back at the minaret—that drill or pump."

"It was not an oil drill," said Ahmed. "I saw no drill stem. It was not an oil pump . . ."

"It was an oil *something*," said Biff, "because we *smelled* oil."

"True, but Al Thaza is very far from the edge of the Ghawar oil field. What would oil equipment be doing there?"

"This may be a stupid question," said Biff, "but could it be some kind of bootleg well?"

"Bootleg?" Ahmed said hesitantly. "I am not familiar with this word."

"Illicit—illegal," Biff explained. "Could somebody be sneaking oil out of the ground and peddling it somewhere?"

"It would be impossible," said Ahmed. "To drill and pump the oil would take much machinery. Then a way would have to be found to get it from the well. And even if that were possible, it would have to be sold or smuggled out of the country on tankers, and there is just no port at which such a thing could happen without being observed here in Saudi Arabia."

"Okay, so it's impossible," said Biff, "but that mechanism is still sitting there in that minaret, and our dads are still trying to solve the oil-field pressure problem. Do you think that's just a coincidence?"

"No."

"Neither do I."

"Assuming, of course, that there was oil there—which there is not—one well would not cause the fluctuation in oil-field pressure which they have experienced," said Ahmed.

"How about two or three or half a dozen?" asked Biff, with half-closed eyes.

"That would simply multiply all the impossibles I mentioned before," said Ahmed.

"Don't forget, the Arab in the white *abbas* said something about Operation Midraak," Biff pointed out. "Wouldn't that indicate some kind of monkey business involving more than just the minaret at Al Thaza?"

"I suppose it would," said Ahmed.

"You never did say what Midraak meant," said Biff.

"I do not know exactly," said Ahmed. "It's Arabic, but it does not make sense to me."

"I know how we could find the definition," said Biff slyly.

"How?" asked Ahmed.

"Look up that guy in the white *abbas* and fancy *kiffieh* when we get to Madyab," said Biff.

"I believe that you believe that I am looking for trouble and not water," said Ahmed.

"I believe that you believe right," said Biff.

CHAPTER IX

Lion's Den

WHEN the bottom edge of the sun began to redden, they roused the animals and left the *waddi.* Biff had been shocked when he awoke from a nap to find the afternoon so far advanced, but when he expressed concern about their having to travel at night, Ahmed had assured him he could find his way more truly by the stars than he could in broad daylight. More important, the Arab boy told him, the night's coolness would make their thirst and the animals' more bearable.

Ahmed rode Zenobia because of Biff's lack of experience as a camel driver. Biff, astride Suji, was having his first ride aboard a pure Arabian. The horse was a delight, gentle and responsive; but the saddle was a horror. It had belonged to the Hambasah whom Suji had bucked off and was in Biff's words, "as near nothing as a thing can get"—just a leather slab on top of a wool blanket tied down with surcingle and breast band and not a stirrup in sight.

A half hour later, they saw the rider.

Light had almost faded from the sky and the evening star had just winked on, when he appeared atop a rise ahead of them. His horse was in a canter and his robes flared out behind him. There seemed to be a dog trotting alongside him, and on his arm was some sort of bird.

"*Salaam Aleikum!*" Ahmed shouted at the moving figure.

"Wait," said Biff. "Do you think we ought to?"

"Oh, yes," Ahmed assured him without hesitancy.

Biff could see the horseman rein in his mount and wheel about.

"*Salaam Aleikum!*" Ahmed shouted again. "That means 'peace be upon you,' " he whispered to Biff.

"*Wa alaykum is salaam,*" came the answering call.

" 'And upon us, peace,' " Ahmed translated softly.

The rider dug heels into his horse and sped toward them, his dog in close pursuit. He arrived in a swirl of hoofs and a cloud of dust and at the sight of him Biff almost reached for his camera. This was without doubt the Bedouin warrior of his photographic dreams. He had a lean face and hawk nose. He wore a jet black *abbas*, a blood-red *kiffieh* and his *ighal* of gold rope was cocked at a jaunty angle atop his head shawl. There was a cartridge belt draped across his chest and a rifle balanced across his saddle. Clinging to his wrist was a hooded hunting falcon, and his dog was a saluki, a desert greyhound which Biff had read was the fastest dog on earth.

"*Masaa Il Khayr,*" said Ahmed to the horseman, raising his hand in a kind of salute.

"*Masaa in nuur,*" the Bedouin answered softly.

Ahmed began talking to the rider in rapid Arabic, punctuated with gestures toward Al Thaza and the south. He slapped their empty saddle and the split water bags as though explaining their plight.

The nomad listened and looked at their mounts, their clothes, their faces—apparently satisfying himself that Ahmed's story was true. When the Arab boy had finished, the Bedouin spoke a few phrases and extended his hand. Ahmed took it with a smile and with arms outstretched to both Biff and the Bedouin, said, "*Sheikh Abdulla ibn Dakhil, il* Biff Brewster."

Biff shook the nomad's hand and saw the man's eyes linger on his face for a moment. Biff sensed that only now had the horseman become aware of his fair skin. Turning his mount again toward the north, the *sheikh* dug heels into the mare and motioned for the boys to follow.

"He says his camp is nearby and we are to be his guests," said Ahmed. He urged Zenobia into motion.

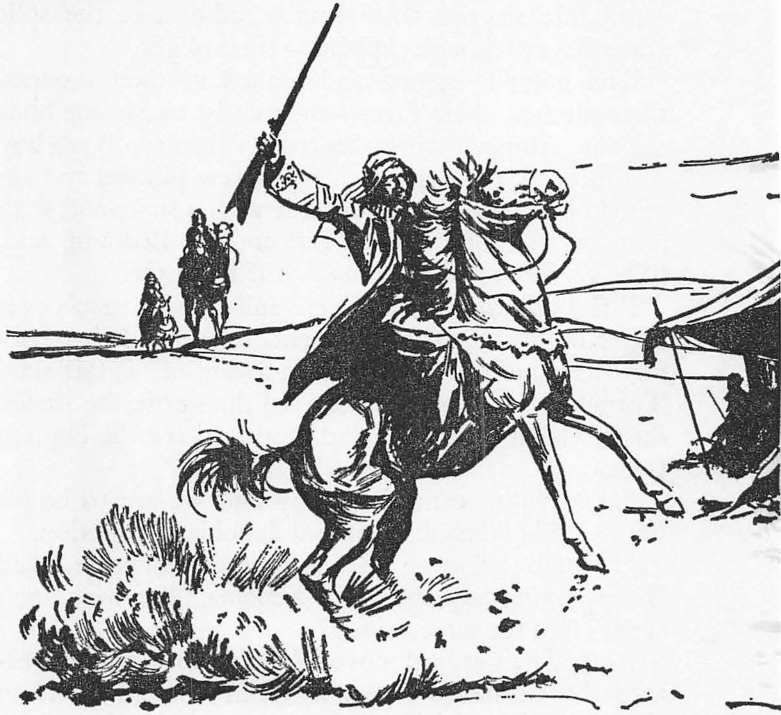
"I hate to bring up such an insignificant trifle," said Biff, spurring Suji abreast of Zenobia, "but why don't we ask him for some water?"

Ahmed's right heel moved Zenobia forward to overtake the Bedouin's horse, and Biff could hear them shouting back and forth. In a moment, the horseman handed something to Ahmed and the Arab boy slowed Zenobia so as to fall in beside Biff again. "He says he knew he would only be away from camp for a few hours, so he brought no water. He offers this."

Biff reached out and took the object from Ahmed. It was a bullet.

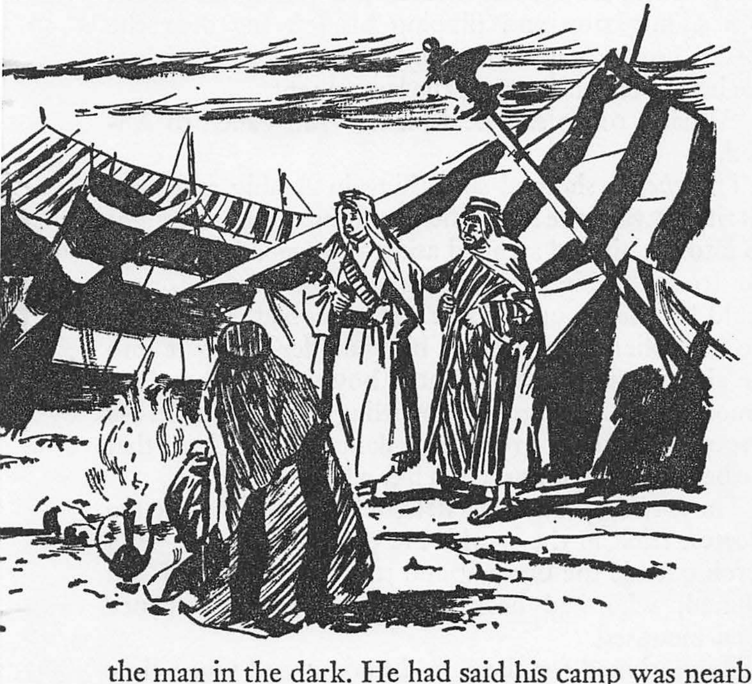
"What am I supposed to do with this?" he inquired.

"Chew on it," said Ahmed. "It is an old Arab trick to relieve thirst."



"Oh well," said Biff, popping the bullet in his mouth. "I can always hope it goes off and puts me out of my misery."

It was completely dark by now and moonless, but the *sheikh* galloped on in front of them as though it were broad daylight. He rode all out with reckless disregard of terrain which changed from gravel to sand to sudden *waddi* without warning. The boys were afraid to practice caution for they did not want to lose the man in the dark. He had said his camp was nearby, but it was fully a half hour of hair-raising gallop before they saw the yellow eyes of campfires winking at them a short distance ahead.



In the dull glow of the fires, he could make out about a dozen tents arranged in a line facing east. They could see the dim shapes of horses, camels, and a few score sheep and goats; and as they drew closer, they saw some shadowy figures in Arab dress peering out in the direction of their galloping mounts.

The *sheikh* raced on toward the largest campfire at top speed. At the last moment, he jerked his mount to a sliding stop and flipping his left leg over the horse's head, catapulted through the air to land catlike before the entrance of the largest tent.

"What a rodeo star he'd make!" Biff called to Ahmed.

The *sheikh* shouted something in Arabic and fired his rifle toward the sky. Then he flung the gun straight up into the air and stepped aside. A ragged boy darted out from the big tent and caught the gun before it could hit the ground. The *sheikh* laughed, and taking the bandolier from around his shoulder, flung it into the air as well. The barefooted boy danced about for a moment, his eyes on the whirling cartridge belt. As it spun toward the ground, he danced under it so that the belt dropped around him like a lassoo.

The *sheikh* roared with delight as though it were the greatest trick in the world. He placed his falcon on a perch outside the big tent and turned toward Biff and Ahmed, who had been watching the performance open-mouthed.

He motioned for them to dismount and when they did, he clapped his hands and the young lad who had caught his gun and bandolier dashed forward and took charge of their mounts.

Biff saw the boy's eyes rest on his face for a moment, then blink and return to examine him more closely. Biff winked at him but found that meant nothing to the lad, so he tried a smile. The boy returned the smile and led their mounts away.

By now, other Arabs had begun to move out of their tents and into the clearing around the big fire. They shouted greetings to the young *sheikh* and smiled cordially at him.

"Guess who's head man around here," Biff whispered.

The *sheikh* motioned toward the boys with his hand and said something which sounded to Biff like an introduction. Most of the men in the group bowed to them, and the boys bowed in return.

One man, however, stepped closer to them and squinted so as to get a better look. He was a tall man with a gray beard and appeared to be in his seventies. As he moved into the firelight, Biff could see that he had one white, sightless eye and an old scar across his left cheek. It was Biff he was examining so closely.

Biff swallowed self-consciously and mustered a weak smile. The old man turned away without a word and strode off into the darkness toward one of the tents.

Biff was sure his fair skin had drawn the old man's notice as it had the young boy's, but most of the other Arabs seemed to be unconcerned about it. The *sheikh* glanced at the old man's disappearing form and with a sweep of his arm, invited the boys to enter the big tent.

The tent was about fifty feet long and made of huge swatches of camel's hair canvas, stitched together like a patchwork quilt. The tent was divided in the center by a huge rug hung between the ridge poles. The sand floor was covered with many rugs, and back near the center partition were three sheepskin mattresses with their ends flung over some camel saddles. The *sheikh* invited the boys to take their ease on the mattresses; and when they did, he passed them a goatskin water bag and the boys enjoyed their first drink in many hours. It was cloudy water and full of mysterious particles, but at this point Biff couldn't have cared less.

The other Arabs had filed in behind them and took their places around the tent in a semicircle facing the mattresses on which the *sheikh* and the boys sat. One of the men had a mortar and pestle with which he ground coffee beans to a powder and after adding pinches of various spices, dumped it into a curved-spout coffeepot which had been boiling on a small fire near the tent entrance. When it had boiled up three times, he removed the pot and served the pungent brew in small white cups without handles.

There were not more than a few drops in Biff's cup, and as he looked at it, he heard Ahmed whisper, "Watch me." Biff held his cup suspended as the Arab boy smiled at the assembled Bedouins and drained the few drops from his cup with a loud sucking sound. Biff stared for a moment but when he felt Ahmed's nudge, he raised his cup and did the same. The Arabs smiled happily.

"At home, they would have sent me away from the table for this," said Biff from the side of his mouth.

"Here, it is good manners," said Ahmed.

Again they served the pungent brew, this time putting a little more in the cups. At that point in the coffee ceremony the gray-bearded old man stalked haughtily into the tent, took his seat beside the young *sheikh,* and focused his one good eye on Biff.

Biff became so self-conscious under the baleful gaze that he had to be nudged by Ahmed when the man came around to fill the coffee cups for the third round.

"How long does it go on?" Biff whispered.

"Never less than two, never more than three," Ahmed answered.

"Allah be praised for that," mumbled Biff, whose mouth was already stinging from the pungent brew. When he had had his cup filled again Biff rolled his eyes as if savoring the coffee, and received appreciative glances from some of the drinkers. Having manfully drained the last drop, he glanced over at the one eye still fastened on him and began to grow just a trifle irritated at the stare. He leaned back with his elbow resting on the camel saddle, feeling more and more like a desert potentate here in this dimly lit tent full of goateed Bedouins sucking at their coffee cups. While most of the men wore some sort of mustache or chin whiskers, few of them wore foot covering of any kind. The few who did wore flimsy sandals. He observed to his secret delight, however, that nearly everyone had some sort of dagger dangling from his belt. Most of the daggers had ornate hilts and scabbards, and Biff began to wish the tent was lighted with something beside candles so he could see the weapons more clearly. It was only when he was leaning forward to get a look at one of the daggers, that he realized the reason it seemed so very dark in the tent was because he was still wearing his sunglasses. He reached up and removed them.

Almost instantly the conversation in the tent began to die away and in a moment complete silence reigned. Every Arab in the tent was staring at him, including the one-eyed old man.

"Wha—what's wrong?" Biff murmured to Ahmed.

"Your blue eyes," said Ahmed. "I think some of them could not tell, because of the dark, that you were a Nasrani."

"Nasrani?"

"Christian," whispered Ahmed.

"Is that bad?" asked Biff.

"In some cases it could be," said Ahmed. "Wait, I'll explain about you to the *sheikh*."

He turned toward the Bedouin chieftain and began to speak to the young man, employing gestures which indicated to Biff that Ahmed was telling the *sheikh* about Biff's background, for the hand motions seemed to be describing tall towers—oil derricks. The *sheikh* looked at Biff with great interest, and a little conversational buzz started among the Arabs. But suddenly, the friendly reaction was shattered by the old man with the one good eye. He leaped to his feet, spat in his coffee cup and threw it down at Biff's feet. There was a shocked silence among the Arabs, and

Biff grew tense. In the next instant, the old man rose to his full height and began a tirade full of fierce arm-wavings and fist clenchings, and there was no doubt in Biff's mind that the ranting was directed at him.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he whispered to Ahmed.

Ahmed listened for a moment. "He is saying the oil companies have fouled the water wells and have driven many tribes from their ancient pastures. He says the tribes have gained nothing from this and that the Nasrani interlopers should be driven out of Arabia."

Biff looked nervously at the old man, not knowing what to say or do. At that moment, the young *sheikh* leaped to his feet and placing his face close to that of the old man, barked a harsh command.

The old man stopped in mid-sentence, his good eye blazing. Slowly, his upraised fist unclenched and his arm dropped to his side. With one last angry glare at Biff, he turned and stomped from the tent.

The *sheikh*'s gaze wandered slowly across the faces of the assembled Arabs, and little by little they began to relax and pick up the threads of their conversation. Then he turned toward the boys and said something to Ahmed.

"He begs your forgiveness for his father's rudeness," said Ahmed. "He says the old man cannot change his old ideas."

"Tell him I understand," said Biff huskily.

The *sheikh* spoke again and as his discourse lengthened, Biff noticed Ahmed's interest quickening and he cast nervous glances at Biff as though hardly able to wait until the desert chieftain had finished talking, to translate his remarks. When he had finished, Biff said, "That's a mouthful. What was it all about?"

"He says his father's feelings about the oil companies are shared by many Bedouins. He says there is even talk of trying to dry up the oil wells so as to drive the Nasrani from the country."

"Dry up the wells?" Biff murmured. "That sounds interesting. Did he say how that was to be done?"

"Yes," said Ahmed. "He spoke of a man who came to their camp many months ago. This man said there was a way to do this if the tribe would help. He wanted to hire some of the tribe and their camels to help haul the machine to do it."

"And the man?" said Biff, leaning forward, "Did he say what he looked like?"

"He wore a white *abbas* and drove a Cadillac," said Ahmed.

CHAPTER X

Terror Town

"THE man in the white *abbas!*" exclaimed Biff. "He really gets around, doesn't he?"

Ahmed started to answer when there was a stirring at the tent entrance. A ripple of appreciation spread through the crowd, and in a moment the boys saw why.

A young Arab was staggering into the tent bearing a huge metal platter. In the platter lay a bed of rice at least six inches deep and in the rice, the dissected parts of one entire animal. It was a mighty load and the young Arab staggered beneath it so that two of the men had to help him lower it to the rugs at the center of the tent. When it had been set on the rugs, Biff could see that it was a young sheep. As the assembled Arabs began to make hungry sounds, two more young men entered the tent with steaming cauldrons of bubbling fat, which they poured over the huge hunks of meat until it soaked every grain of the rice and began to overflow onto the rugs. When they had finished pouring the fat on the meat, the men in the tent looked expectantly at the *sheikh,* who motioned for the boys to move forward. When Ahmed and Biff crouched in front of the platter, the *sheikh* squatted beside them and the rest of the Arabs pressed forward in a circle around the steaming repast.

With guttural exclamations of delight, the men began to pluck morsels of meat from the dissected parts of the sheep. Biff watched as they dropped the meat into the rice, formed little balls of the steaming mush, and popped them into their mouths. It was all accompanied by moans of pain as the diners' fingers were seared by the still bubbling fat, but they plunged them in their mouths and went merrily on with their eating.

For a moment Biff hung back, certain that only third-degree burns would result from trying to eat this meal. When Ahmed noticed him, he pointed to the steaming carcass and mumbled something about the Arabs being offended if he did not eat.

Biff could think of nothing more foolhardy than alienating this group of be-daggered nomads so he took a deep breath and dug in. He ripped slices of meat from the sheep and found them to be tasty. But when he tried rolling the little rice balls and meat together, the bubbling fat seared his fingers. As the hot fat cooled, however, Biff became more dexterous and soon was rolling rice balls as well as any Arab. Ahmed, too, had been busy eating, but Biff noticed that as he ate, he was engaged in chatting with the young *sheikh.* When it was apparent the Arabs had filled themselves, the *sheikh* clapped his hands and two young men ran into the tent and removed the platter. Boys entered the tents with water skins and towels which were used by the gorged men to cleanse their hands and soon they were sprawled about the tent belching happily.

Now that he was through eating, Biff tried to catch Ahmed's eye. However, since the young Arab lad was still busily engaged in talking with the *sheikh*, Biff decided to lean back and help his meal digest by relaxing. It was a grave error. His full stomach, the warm tent, and the dull buzz of Arabic conversation, conspired to make his eyelids heavy. He nodded a few times, recovered to look around in embarrassment but saw that no one had taken notice, so he decided just to give his eyes a nice . . . long . . . rest . . .

It seemed only seconds later that a voice cut through the haze, a boy's voice, high and piping:

"Beef Brewster . . . *effendi* . . ."

Biff's eyes popped open. All those Arabs gone . . . Ahmed gone, the *sheikh* gone. And that was daylight streaming into the tent. Three feet from his face were two large brown eyes and a smile full of mottled teeth.

"*Sabah il-khayr*," said the piping voice belonging to the eyes and the smile.

Biff shook his head and rubbed his eyes. He stared at the boy squatting beside his mattress. This was the *sheikh*'s attendant—the boy who had caught the rifle and bandolier in mid-air. Only now he held something else in his hands. Two bowls—one brimming with sharp-smelling camel's milk, the other containing honey with a blob of butter floating in it. And resting atop his head was a slab of bread. He deposited the bowls on the rug in front of Biff, plucked the slab of bread from his curly locks and added it to the repast. Then he plopped down a foot away and, cupping his chin in his hands, waited for Biff's next move.

"Well, thank you," Biff murmured, looking down at the repast. The bread looked a little thumb-printed, the camel's milk had a little desert dust in it, and three large green flies whirled around the honey.

"Oh well, I guess they won't drink much," said Biff with a gulp. He reached for the bread, waved the flies off, and dunked it in the honey.

"Biff!" he heard Ahmed calling. He looked up to see the Arab boy poke his head inside the tent. "Hurry!" said Ahmed. "We ride with the *sheikh* and some of his men to Madyab."

"How come?" asked Biff.

"There is a camel market there," said Ahmed. "They have some animals to sell."

"Okay, okay," said Biff, stuffing the last of the bread and honey in his mouth and gulping the milk. "I'm ready as soon as I splash some water on my face."

"Here," said Ahmed, handing the water bag to the young Arab boy, who took it eagerly and prepared to pour for Biff's morning ablutions.

"I'll get the animals and meet you down there," said Ahmed. He pointed toward the edge of the encampment where Biff could see a circle of Arabs gathered around Sheikh Abdulla. Some were preparing to mount horses, others were adjusting the halters on some young camels, and Biff decided these must be the animals the Arabs were going to sell in Madyab.

Biff removed as much of the desert grime as he could without benefit of soap and when he finished, dried himself on the clean interior of his *abbas* and bowed to the young Arab boy. The boy smiled and bowed back. Biff looked around at the encampment and the surrounding desert which was almost luminous in the early-morning light. He strolled toward the conclave where Ahmed had said he would meet him. They arrived at about the same time and when Ahmed led Suji into the group, Biff could see the Bedouins looking admiringly at the classic lines of the mighty stallion. They walked around and around him studying the delicate moulding of the muscles and veins standing out through Suji's velvety skin. They pointed to the legs and fetlocks, clean of feather, a proof of the purity of bloodline. They measured his height in hands and found it to be fifteen. When they asked Ahmed where he had obtained such a horse, he told them that it had been a gift from the King to his family. He modestly failed to explain his own part in earning the gift, however.

The boy who had helped Biff with his washing squatted down and pointed to the small royal brand which had been burnt inside Suji's leg so as not to mar his clean-limbed look. The Arabs bent to examine it and made proper Arabic sounds of appreciation.

At this point, the *sheikh* clapped his hands together and commanded his tribesmen to mount their horses and prepare to leave for Madyab.

Biff mounted Suji, Ahmed leaped aboard Zenobia, and a few moments later, they were galloping across the desert toward Madyab. When Biff looked back to take a last look at the Bedouin encampment, he was surprised to see the little Arab boy trotting along behind them on a donkey.

"Looks like we have a mascot," said Biff. "What's his name?"

"Yusuf," said Ahmed.

Biff waved to the boy, and the boy waved back. He smiled and looked over at Ahmed. "Well, did the *sheikh* tell you any more about the man in the white *abbas?*"

"One very interesting thing," said Ahmed.

"Oh?"

"He said the man had a strange accent," Ahmed said, "and I had noticed that about the man at the minaret."

"Odd accent, odd business," Biff murmured. "It's got to be the same fellow we saw at the minaret, and he is really busy stirring up trouble, isn't he?"

"It's that boast about drying up the oil field that interests me," said Ahmed. "And saying that he has a machine to do it."

"The one he wanted to have the *sheikh*'s people haul for him, yes," said Biff. "And that must be the gadget I have a picture of."

"Yes, I believe we have enough evidence to convince our fathers that this is more than imagination when we call them."

"Call them? From where?" Biff asked.

"Madyab," said Ahmed. "There is a phone there, I am told."

"From Arabian Nights to the twentieth century in one easy camel hop," drawled Biff.

A half hour later they saw the gleaming white buildings of Madyab looming ahead of them. The structures were surprisingly high but almost uniformly alike. The only building in sight which was not severely cubical was the town mosque, the Moslem church at the center of the city. Its rounded dome and colorful mosaics stood out in refreshing contrast to the stodgy houses, coated with gypsum to fend off the sun's rays and dotted with tiny windows to furnish shade for the interiors. Near the mosque at the center of the city lay the bazaar, the Arab shopping area. Near the edge of the city was the camel market, and as they approached it they could see scores of animals and their owners, squatted together waiting for the auctioneer's chant to begin. This was Sheikh Abdulla's destination, so the boys said their good-by and offered profuse thanks for his kindness. The *sheikh* dismissed it with a curt wave of the hand and proceeded on his way.

"Was he angry at us?" Biff inquired.

"Oh, no," said Ahmed. "That is the Bedu way. They do not say good-by or expect thanks. It is the unbreakable code of the desert to offer help to anyone."

"Even Nasranis, eh?" Biff smiled. "Well, I appreciate it anyway." He glanced back at the *sheikh* and when he did he was surprised to see that Yusuf was still following them on his donkey.

"Looks like our mascot doesn't want to say good-by either," said Biff. "I guess he wants to see what other kind of trouble I can stir up."

Ahmed led the way from the camel market toward the bazaar. Even here the population depended mostly upon animals for transportation and hauling, although there were quite a few small European cars on the streets and even an occasional American car. As they entered the bazaar itself, exotic smells drifted out from the shops which lined the narrow streets—spices and coffee blended with perfumes so that the air almost tasted sweet. Deep piles of rugs stood in front of many shops, and they saw shopkeepers haggling with veiled women over the prices of the brightly colored Karastans and Isfahans. There were long rows of open-air stalls in which artisans were making everything from pottery and sandals to metal cook pots and fancy cloaks.

They came at last to a shop over which hung a sagging awning, and when Ahmed saw the sign of the bell on the front door, he told Biff this must be the place with the telephone. It was apparently a café, for inside Biff could see men squatted on long-legged wicker benches puffing away at tall water pipes. Aromatic smoke hung in thin clouds in the café. Some of the loose-robed, skull-capped men were drinking coffee, others were sipping glasses of a green liquid.

On the wall, near the entrance, they could see a telephone. "You'd better do the calling," said Biff as they dismounted.

"I would rather you be with me," said Ahmed, "to make sure I do not forget anything." He looked about for some spot to fasten the animals' reins.

In a moment, there was a scamper of feet and Yusuf dashed up to grasp the reins.

"Attaboy!" Biff grinned at the little fellow.

They strolled inside and Ahmed walked to the phone. He started to lift it from its hook, paused, and said, "Perhaps I had better make notes on what I want to say. Sometimes the connection is bad."

They walked to one of the wicker platforms, sat down, and a waiter scurried to their side. Ahmed asked him something in Arabic and the waiter took a stub of a pencil from his ear and gave it to him. He then provided him with a scrap of paper from his apron and stood awaiting their next desire. Ahmed looked around the café, said something in Arabic and held up two fingers. He glanced out at Yusuf and changed it to three. As the waiter hurried off, Ahmed said, "I ordered some of that green tea you see around here."

"Good, I could stand something wet," said Biff. "Now about those notes."

"Well, we must not forget the statement we heard about Operation Midraak," Ahmed said, scribbling the word on the paper. "And the reference to Rhamadan." He wrote that down also.

"And the picture we made in the minaret," said Biff. "That's the really hot item."

Ahmed wrote the words *machine picture* on the paper. "Anything else?" he murmured.

"I guess not," said Biff, "unless you want to mention the man in the white *abbas* trying to hire Abdulla."

Ahmed jotted the words, *man hiring Bedu* on the paper. "That's about it," he murmured, then rose and walked to the phone. Biff listened as Ahmed chattered away in Arabic into the ancient phone. From the increasing frown on the Arab lad's face, it was apparent he was having difficulty completing the call. After a while Ahmed hung up the receiver and returned to the wicker bench.

"Circuits are busy. The operator will call back," he said.

They picked up the glasses of green tea which the waiter delivered, and Ahmed motioned to him to deliver one to Yusuf outside. The waiter obliged, and the boys were delighted by the Arab youngster's amazed look when the waiter bowed low and handed it to him.

Biff found, when he sipped it, that it was sweet and syrupy. Too sweet for his taste, he decided. By the looks on Ahmed's and Yusuf's faces, however, they were enjoying the drink immensely.

They sat cross-legged on the wicker benches, and Biff glanced around the café. He saw mattresses slung along the walls and Ahmed explained that this was a mattress café—that at night the mattresses were placed on the benches and became beds for those who wished to spend the night.

They had been so engaged in looking around at the café and its occupants that they were surprised when they glanced outside to see that a small knot of people had gathered around Yusuf and the animals. Yusuf appeared to be talking to some of the people about Suji, for the boys could see some of them patting the horse and making references to his magnificent physique, just as the Arabs had back at Sheikh Abdulla's encampment.

"Boy, that Suji really draws a crowd." Biff grinned. "I never saw a country where folks appreciated horses so much."

Ahmed smiled nervously. "I wish they wouldn't crowd around him so," he said.

"Oh, I don't think they'll hurt him," said Biff. They watched the steadily growing crowd assembling around Suji and, while it was making Ahmed nervous, Yusuf was enjoying every minute of it. They could see the little Arab boy pointing to the royal brand on Suji's flank to indicate the horse's royal lineage. He pointed into the café toward the boys, and they saw some of the crowd shade their eyes to look in at them.

"I wish the operator would call back," said Ahmed impatiently. "I would like to get our call completed and move on."

At that moment the phone rang.

Ahmed leaped off the wicker bench and ran to the phone. Biff heard him answer in Arabic and after a short wait, say something else and look toward Biff with an impatient scowl. He stood on one foot, then the other and while he waited, bent down to look out toward the crowd around Suji and Yusuf.

Biff's gaze turned that way, and his eye fell on a new form in the crowd out in front. It was a tall form in an expensive linen suit with a panama hat. There was no mistaking who that was, and when he turned around to look in the café, Biff immediately recognized Rex Craig, the American reporter.

"Well, well, well," the reporter called out to them as he strode into the café. "So you found your horse, huh?"

"Hi there, Mr. Craig," said Biff. "Yes, we found him. How did you know that was Suji?"

"The little Arab kid out front. He's a regular sideshow barker. Tellin' everybody all about what a royal horse Suji is." He glanced toward Ahmed, standing at the phone. "Where did you find Suji?" he asked.

"Boy, is that a long story!" said Biff.

"Well, how on earth did you wind up here in Madyab?" Rex Craig inquired.

"As I say," Biff grinned, "it's a long, *long* story." He glanced toward Ahmed, still chattering away in Arabic. "We've really been busy since we saw you in Aramco City yesterday."

"Then Ahmed's calling you boys' fathers, I take it," said Rex.

"That's right," said Biff.

Ahmed's conversation ended, and he slowly hung up the receiver. He glanced at the piece of notepaper in his hand and walked back to where Biff and Rex Craig were sitting. "Our fathers are not there. They've gone to Riyadh," he said.

"I think I could have told you that," said Rex Craig.

They looked at him in surprise.

"Yes," said the reporter. "When I went back to your dad late yesterday afternoon, that was the word I was given. The King and his government are in Riyadh, you know, and I understand they're a little upset over this oil-field pressure business and called your fathers in to quiz 'em about it."

Ahmed looked down at the piece of paper in his hand and flicked it nervously. "If only we could talk to them," he said.

"If I were you kids, I wouldn't be calling them at Riyadh just to tell them about finding Suji," said Rex Craig. "They've got real worries right now."

Biff's eyes met Ahmed's, and they said nothing for a moment. Finally, Biff mumbled, "Yes, you're probably right."

"But look, what's the story about Suji? How did you find him anyway?" Rex Craig insisted.

"It's a long story," said Ahmed hesitantly.

"It's a long story, that's all I keep hearing." Rex Craig grinned. "Can't you kind of condense it? Or is it a state secret?"

Biff looked at Ahmed, who was staring down in embarrassment at the notes in his hand. He couldn't decide whether the Arab boy didn't know how to handle the brash reporter or was reluctant to tell about their Al Thaza adventure. It suddenly occurred to Biff that it might not be a good idea to tell the reporter anything until they had notified their dads of their discovery in the minaret. In his zeal to run down a good story, Craig might foul up everything.

"I'll tell you," said Biff finally. "We really had a long ride before we caught up with Suji. A Bedouin had her. He said Suji had followed one of his mares."

Rex Craig stared at Biff. "Is that all?"

"That's all." Biff grinned.

"I thought you said it was a long story," said the reporter.

"Well," Biff stammered, "I meant it was a long ride . . . you know." He laughed loudly.

"Okay, okay." The reporter chuckled. "I think you're holding out on me, you rascal, but I've got more to worry about than lost-horse stories!" He stood up. "Good luck, lads," he said with a grin. "I'm off." He reached out to shake Ahmed's hand and as he did, the note was knocked from the Arab boy's hand and fluttered to the floor.

"Oh, sorry," said Rex Craig, picking it up and returning it to him. He shook Biff's hand. "So long, Yank." He grinned. As he was leaving, they heard a sudden loud, auto horn blaring in the street outside the café. They looked outside and saw that the crowd around Suji had grown to some twenty-five or thirty people and was blocking traffic.

"Now look what your horse has caused!" Rex Craig laughed.

"Merciful Allah!" Ahmed gasped. "We must get out there."

"You pay the bill, I'll go out," said Biff. He started out the door in front of Rex Craig, Just as he did, he saw a long, black car edging its way past the crowd in the street. It was the car which had been sounding its horn to get by—a Cadillac. And behind the wheel sat a man in an expensive white *abbas* and dark glasses. He had a heavy nose which was pinched just above the nostrils.

Biff stopped quickly, and Rex Craig ran into him.

"Hey, gangway," said the reporter. "I've got things to do."

"Ahmed," Biff called over his shoulder. "Look—the man in that car."

Ahmed was just hurrying up behind after having paid the bill. He leaned down to peer under the awning in front of the café. Biff heard his sudden intake of breath.

"Is it or isn't it?" Biff asked.

"It—it certainly looks as if it could be," said Ahmed hesitantly. "The white *abbas*, the car."

Rex Craig gave Biff a little push. "What in the blue blazes are you kids yammering about? Move on and let a working reporter through, will you?"

Biff stepped aside. "Sorry, Mr. Craig." He grinned. "I just thought I saw someone I knew."

"You better stop gawking and get out there and break up that traffic jam before you have the gendarmes down on you," said Rex Craig. He waved his hand. "See you later," he said, and headed up the street to the left.

Biff had not taken his eyes off the creeping Cadillac all the time he was talking to Rex Craig. He waved good-by to the reporter and turned toward Ahmed.

"What do you think? Shouldn't we tail him?" he asked.

"Perhaps we should," said Ahmed. "But what about this crowd?"

"Tell 'em to break it up, they're blocking traffic," said Biff, his eyes still on the Cadillac, which had passed the café and was creeping along because of the narrow street. "And tell Yusuf to stand by until we get back." He started after the Cadillac.

Ahmed said something to the crowd and Biff heard loud laughter. He heard Ahmed speak Yusuf's name.

Biff yelled, "Come on. Let's go, Ahmed."

Ahmed hurried up and fell in beside Biff. The car was moving so slowly it was no problem at all to stay close behind. Only when it reached the next corner did they have to quicken their pace. They were just about to turn the corner, when Biff happened to glance back, and to his chagrin, he saw that Yusuf either had not heard or had misunderstood Ahmed's command. He was following them with Suji and Zenobia in tow. And, close behind Yusuf, strolled most of the crowd which had assembled outside the café.

"Well, if this isn't a pretty kettle of camel's milk," Biff muttered. "We've got half the population of Arabia on the trail with us."

Ahmed motioned ahead. The Cadillac had stopped. It had stopped before the town mosque, the Moslem church and the most ornate building in the city. The door swung open and the man in the white *abbas* stepped out. Smoothing his garments, he strode rapidly into the mosque. However, the boys caught a glimpse of a large nose and a round face before the man disappeared.

"I wonder who he is?" Biff whispered.

Ahmed shook his head.

"I guess we'll just have to wait until he comes out," said Biff. "But then, what if he gets in that car and takes off? We never will know!"

"That's true," said Ahmed.

Biff stared helplessly about and suddenly remembered Yusuf and the crowd. Sure enough, they were still behind them—the solemn Arab boy, Suji, Zenobia, and about twenty-five grinning Arabs, standing on the street corner watching the curious actions of the strange Nasrani and his Arab companion. Biff didn't know whether to shoo them away or what. It occurred to him for a moment that perhaps one of these grinning curiosity seekers might know who the man in the white *abbas* was, but he decided that such a question might seem even more decidedly foolish than what they were doing right now. Suddenly, the solution dawned on him.

"A picture!" he whispered to Ahmed. "I'll take his picture when he comes out. Then we can show it around and find out who he is."

Ahmed glanced back at the crowd on the corner, and he murmured, "Biff, I don't know. . . ."

Biff unleashed his camera. "Why, it's perfect," he insisted. "Then we won't have to worry about shadowing him any more." He checked the light, set his camera controls and took a practice peek at the mosque through the view finder. As he did this, he noticed that the curious crowd behind Yusuf and the two animals had begun to edge closer.

Biff glanced at the Cadillac. "Say, I don't see any license plate on the back."

"It's in front," said Ahmed. "I could go look."

"Good idea," said Biff. "Go take a peek."

Ahmed began to stroll casually past the Cadillac, slowing up to peer inside. He had almost reached the front of the car when there was a sudden rustle of silk. The man in the white *abbas* reappeared and started down the steps. Ahmed, apparently confused, stopped, then turned and started back toward Biff. Biff had already raised his camera and aimed it at the man when, to his chargrin, Ahmed walked squarely between him and his subject. Biff waved his hand, signaling Ahmed to move aside. Ahmed became even more confused and moved the wrong way. In another second his chance would be gone so Biff barked, "Duck, Ahmed!"

Ahmed ducked, the white-clad Arab looked up in surprise, and Biff clicked the shutter. "Perfect," he mumbled.

Before he could lower the camera from his eye the Arab in the white *abbas* let out a howl of rage. He raised his fist and started toward Biff.

"Oh, oh!" Biff gulped. "Let's go, Ahmed."

Ahmed darted to his side, but as Biff turned and started to run he saw that they were headed straight into a wall of frowning Arabs—the crowd which had followed behind Yusuf and the animals from the café. Standing in the front row were four faces they had not seen a moment before.

It was the Hambasah and the three Arabs who had chased them from the minaret at Al Thaza.

CHAPTER XI

Incarcerated

"WE CAN'T go that way!" Biff grunted, sliding to a stop. He grabbed Ahmed, spun him around and started in the opposite direction. But charging toward them with arms upraised, was the man in the white *abbas*, his pinched nostrils flaring, his almond eyes ablaze with anger.

"And we can't go that way either!" Biff added.

"This way!" Ahmed commanded, pointing across the street to an alley entrance which wound away into the gloom between the high buildings of the bazaar.

"Lead the way!" Biff shouted, spinning on his heel. As he did, the camera on the cord around his neck swung out and he felt someone grab and yank it. The yank pulled him up short and he turned to see the Hambasah trying to jerk the camera away from him. Without thinking, he cocked his right fist and threw it. The punch landed flush on the Arab's nose. The man squealed and reeled back into the arms of his henchmen. At the sight of the Arab's bloodied nose, a howl went up from the crowd and they pressed toward him. Biff grabbed his camera in one hand, the skirt of his *abbas* in the other, and took off after Ahmed. The screams of the crowd rose higher.

"Now, what are *they* mad about?" Biff shouted to Ahmed. "I hit him, not them."

"You struck a Moslem and you're a Nasrani!" Ahmed yelled back over his shoulder.

"Is that bad?" Biff shouted.

"What's it sound like?" Ahmed replied.

Biff looked back at the mob streaming into the alley behind them. The rose-nosed Hambasah and his henchmen were leading the way.

"It sounds like a bad time to stop and arbitrate!" Biff yelled. "Can't you run faster?"

They hurried by the spice-smelling shops, hurdled a donkey cart strolling across their path, and weaved their way past some cloth samples dangling from the awning of another shop. At the next corner, they turned left and in two strides were in the middle of a tower of pots and pans which flew in all directions with a clatter that echoed throughout the narrow streets. With a loud cry, the tinsmith ran from his shop and joined the chase, but the boys did not stop. They sped down the center of the dirt street. A man with a goatskin bag, sprinkling the street to settle dust, hove up in their path. Ahmed ran straight into him, dumping man and bag all over the bazaar. He, too, joined the chase.

"Seems to me we've done this thing before—only on a camel!" Biff yelled.

Ahmed raced on beneath the overhanging roofs of the shops which met in the middle and kept this narrow street in perpetual darkness. As they reached another corner, Biff motioned to a thick-looking lattice work overhanging the street.

"Follow me!" he cried.

With a great leap, Biff grabbed the overhanging lattice. He meant to perform a swing which would catapult him over the lattice and onto the low-hanging roof of the shop. But it didn't work.

With a loud splintering, the latticework gave way and collapsed upon them. They tore loose from the debris; when they started running again, they saw that the mob had gained on them. And still leading the mob was the Hambasah and his tribesmen.

The boys raced on and were soon lost again in the maze of alleys which honeycombed the bazaar. Another corner, then another and then—

"Oh my gosh! Dead end!" Biff shouted, sliding to a stop. But when they turned to retrace their steps, they saw they were too late. The mob was too close. However, it was at that moment Biff spied a door in the wall at the end of the alley. It was their only possible avenue of escape, and he headed for it.

"No, no!" Ahmed shouted after him.

But Biff heard the mob turn the corner behind them and knew he had no time to argue. He galloped on through the door and into a darkened interior. He slowed down to acclimate his eyes to the darkness and heard Ahmed clatter up behind him.

"No, Biff! Not in here!" he gasped.

Biff was still trying to pierce the gloom. "What do you mean, not here? We sure can't go out!"

"But this is the back of the mosque!" Ahmed exclaimed. "A Christian in a Moslem temple is defilement to these people!"

"Then let's find a way for me to *un*defile this place," Biff gasped.

He led the way through the darkened temple, slipping on some loose prayer rugs, stumbling over some worshipers' feet and almost running head-on into a pillar. But he had seen a sliver of light on the other side of the temple, and the boys ran toward it as fast as their tiring legs could carry them. The light proved to be an exit, and after stumbling down three steps, pushing open a heavy door, Biff staggered into the hairy arms of a uniformed man. He grunted as Biff reeled into him, and staggered back against the side of a jeep parked there in the alley. He grabbed Biff's arm, and as Ahmed stumbled out the door behind Biff he grabbed the Arab lad as well and pushed them both toward the door of the jeep.

"In there, quickly!" he snapped in a heavy accent.

Biff was surprised to hear the man speak English but decided it was the wrong time to compliment him. Biff leaped into the vehicle behind Ahmed, and the uniformed man jumped behind the wheel. He slammed the car in gear and went racing up the alley as the cries of "infidel" began to grow louder behind them. They saw the mob burst out of the door as the jeep picked up speed. The Hambasah, still leading the mob, yelled in frustration after them and shook his fist.

The policeman had just shifted into second as the jeep reached the corner. There stood a welcoming party. Part of the mob had split to prevent escape from the rear door, and they stood directly in the path of the jeep. The policeman never took his foot off the accelerator and bowled straight toward the crowd. At the last minute, the mob parted, and the jeep raced by. But as it did Biff felt hands clutching at him and objects being flung. As he looked up, someone threw a handful of dirt into his eyes. He was blinded, and all he could do was hang on and pray. He knew the jeep was twisting and turning, taking corners on two wheels, but he hadn't any idea where they were going. He only knew the sounds of the mob were growing dimmer behind them.

Suddenly, the jeep skidded to a stop, and Ahmed grabbed Biff's arm to help him out of the seat. He felt himself being led a few steps to a door. The door opened. He could see a dim corridor, along which he was pushed by Ahmed and the policeman. There was a turn, the sound of an opening door, and a shove from Ahmed.

Then he heard a door clang shut behind them. "I hope we can keep the mob away from you," the policeman snarled and hurried away up the hall.

Biff opened one eye, then the other. He blinked, tried to brush the dirt away, blinked again and then, with tears streaming down his face, finally got a look at the door which had clanged. It was a door with bars.

They were in a jail cell!

"Are you all right?" Ahmed asked.

"I think so," Biff said, checking his head for bumps. "You okay?"

"For the moment," said Ahmed, cocking his ear toward the sound of the mob.

Biff took a deep breath and looked around their cell. It contained two swing-down bunks covered by two filthy mattresses. The one-by-one window let in very little light and lots of flies.

"Boy, if I didn't get us in a fine mess!" Biff groaned.

"It could be worse," said Ahmed, still listening to the cry of the mob.

"Not much worse," Biff insisted. "How about Suji and Zenobia? I wonder what happened to them during all this?"

"We will just have to depend on Yusuf," said Ahmed.

"You're nice to say it, but I know you'd like to kill me after all the trouble I caused," said Biff.

"*Kismet,*" said Ahmed calmly. "Let us start worrying about how long we'll have to stay in this place. I know they are going to have to keep us here until the mob leaves—maybe longer. If we have broken any law there may be a trial."

Biff stared disconsolately around their filthy quarters. "My dad and yours just might be wondering what's become of us," he drawled.

"Since it was yesterday afternoon they left for Riyadh, they probably think we're back in Aramco City by now," Ahmed pointed out.

"Unless they checked to see if we got back," said Biff.

"They may be so busy with the King, they have not had the chance," said Ahmed. He strode to the window to listen to the mob, whose howls had subsided considerably.

"The officer is probably out front pacifying them," said the Arab boy.

"I hope he doesn't take too long," said Biff. "I'd hate to sleep here tonight."

"Perhaps you ought to have a picture of this place to go along with your other shots," Ahmed chuckled. Biff looked down at his camera. He checked the film roll number. "By golly, I've got one shot left. Why don't you just do that? That'll really be a shot to show back home—if I ever get back home." He handed the camera to Ahmed. "Here, I'll stand in the light from the window and you take it. It's fast film."

Ahmed sighted the camera as Biff posed near the filthy bunk. "I'll title this, lounging in my luxurious quarters at the Madyab Hilton!" he said.

Ahmed snapped the picture, then studied the camera. "A beautiful camera," he said admiringly.

Biff held a finger to his lips. "Sh-h! I hear someone coming."

Footsteps echoed in the hall outside. Out of the gloom strode the policeman who had rescued the boys from the mob. He came to the door of the cell and peered in.

"Nasrani?" he said.

Biff moved to the front of the cell. "Yes?" he answered.

"They say if you will let them have the camera, they will go away," said the officer in a heavy accent.

"Who's they? Who says?" asked Biff.

"Their spokesman. The Bedu," said the officer.

"The Hambasah?" asked Ahmed from behind Biff.

"I believe, yes. They say the Nasrani violated the word of the Koran by taking the picture. Come, the camera," growled the officer. "Then the mob will leave."

"I do not have it," said Biff.

The officer squinted at him angrily. "I can come in and search, you know," he snapped.

"We lost the camera in the chase," Ahmed put in. "It lies in the streets of the city somewhere."

Realizing Ahmed had the camera in his possession, Biff decided to stall for time. He moved confidently toward the bars and said, "Here, search me. I do not have the camera."

The officer reached through the bars and patted him from head to foot. He crooked a finger at Ahmed and said, "You too."

Biff's heart beat faster, but Ahmed moved up to the bars with arms upraised and allowed himself to be searched. There was no camera on him.

"Well, I will tell them," the officer growled. "Meanwhile, you will prepare to answer questions about your conduct later." He disappeared up the hall.

"Whew!" Biff sighed. "That was close. Where did you hide it?"

Ahmed lifted the corner of the mattress and withdrew the camera.

"Boy, oh boy," said Biff, reaching for it. "They really want this camera pretty badly. Now I *know* we've got something."

"Obviously."

"But why would that Hambasah want this camera?" Biff asked. "He doesn't know we took that picture at the Al Thaza minaret."

"Probably the man in the white *abbas* told him to get it," Ahmed suggested. "He did object to our taking his picture. And if we're right about him being the one we saw at the minaret, they're in with him."

"But look," said Biff. "The Hambasah and the other three men got to the mosque just a few seconds before I took that picture. He didn't have a chance to tell them *anything*, yet the first thing that Hambasah did was grab for the camera."

"Yes, I saw," said Ahmed. "I thought he was just grabbing at you and got the camera."

"I don't think so," said Biff. "It looked to me as though he was after that camera. Period!"

"It's confusing, to be sure," said Ahmed.

"Speaking of confusion," said Biff, "what was the cop talking about when he said the picture-taking made the mob angry—something about the Koran forbidding it?"

"In the Koran, the Moslem Bible, Mohammed frowns upon artistic recreation of the human form," Ahmed explained. "Some of the more devout Moslems regard photography as part of this law."

"Looks like I broke all the rules today," said Biff.

"You didn't miss many," Ahmed chuckled.

"*Kismet*," said Biff.

They waited—waited with the sweat rolling off them for the cell was sweltering. The minutes turned to hours and the shadows began to lengthen. The sound of the mob had long since died away, but there was not a sign of the officer who had put them in the cell.

"Maybe they're adding up the bill against us," said Biff, "It might take this long."

They waited as the cell grew dark. Night had fallen. Still no one came. The place was silent as a tomb.

Suddenly, there came a shaft of light down the hall. There was a sound of mumbled words and approaching footsteps. And then the happiest sight the boys had seen in hours. Walking down the hall with the policeman came the American reporter, Rex Craig.

CHAPTER XII

Come and Gone

"OH, brother, are we glad to see you!" Biff shouted. "How did you find us?"

"Just followed the trail of debris," Rex Craig answered with a grin, as the jailer unlocked their cell door.

The boys squeezed out the door and shook hands with the reporter.

"I don't mind telling you, we were beginning to get worried," said Biff.

"I don't blame you," said Rex Craig. "You really upset the natives around here. I was afraid to come down until after dark. It was a little unpleasant for Nasranis to be on the street after you got through."

"What about the damage we did?" Ahmed asked.

"I've got it taken care of," said the reporter. "When your fathers get this bill, they'll really scream."

"Well, there goes my allowance for a few years," said Biff. "Just put Ahmed's stuff on my bill. It was all my fault."

They reached the end of the hall and entered a room where a clerk was seated at a high desk. He wore a skull cap, a dirty shirt, and a sleepy look.

"You will sign your names stating you have received fair treatment," said the policeman.

"Oh, sure—fair as can be," said Biff, grabbing the pen and signing his name. Ahmed did the same.

"Thank you, Captain," said Rex Craig. "After you, boys," he said, nodding toward the door.

They hurried to the door and stepped outside into the deserted street. An American car stood at the curb.

"Jump in, men," said Rex Craig.

The boys climbed into the car, and as Rex Craig climbed behind the wheel, Biff said, "I tell you, I'm really impressed, Mr. Craig. After the turmoil I caused today, I thought sure we'd be in for ten to life. You must have influence around here. I really appreciate it."

"We Americans have to help each other. I just used the *Global News* influence," said the reporter as he slipped the car into gear and headed up the street.

For the first time since they had left the jail, Ahmed spoke.

"Mr. Craig, would you have any idea what happened to the boy who had charge of our animals?"

"Why don't we try that café where we met? He could have returned there after all the excitement," Craig suggested.

"Good idea," said Biff.

The car turned a corner and Biff recognized the street where the café was located. The café was dark, but to their delight, they saw a huge form standing in front of the café and squatting on the ground sat a form that could only be Yusuf!

"There he is!" Ahmed exclaimed. "It's Yusuf with the animals. Everything is all right."

"Wait a minute," said Biff, peering through the darkness as the car drew closer. "I don't see Suji!"

Rex Craig drew up before the café and stopped. Yusuf looked up sleepily, then, with a cry, jumped to his feet. The boys piled out of the car with Rex Craig right behind them.

Biff was right. Zenobia was there and beside her, Yusuf's donkey. But Suji was nowhere in sight.

"Yusuf! Where is Suji?" Ahmed demanded

The Arab boy stared blankly at him, his mouth agape and tears in his eyes. Ahmed suddenly remembered he was speaking the wrong language and switched to Arabic.

The little Arab boy began chattering an excited reply. He pointed and gestured and then broke down completely.

"What is it?" Biff asked. "What's happened?"

Ahmed opened his mouth to explain, but before he could say a word, three forms jumped out of the darkness of the café entrance. In each of their right hands was a curved dagger.

It was the Hambasah and two of his helpers.

They flicked the air with their knives and motioned Biff, Ahmed, and Rex Craig to back up against the car. They obeyed. The Hambasah looked at Biff and spoke in harsh Arabic. Biff shook his head to indicate he did not understand. The Hambasah took a step toward him with upraised dagger and spoke the same words, more harshly this time.

"He wants the camera," said Ahmed.

"But—but—" Biff stammered, "it's all we've got—"

"Biff! Don't try to be a hero!" Rex Craig barked. "It's just a camera—give it to him. Do you want to get us all killed?"

Biff's mouth was dry, and he could feel his legs shaking. There was no means of escape. Slowly, he lifted the camera and cord from around his neck. He held it out to the Hambasah, who snatched it from him.

"Well, there goes everything," Biff mumbled.

The three Bedouins backed away and with their daggers in menacing position, edged up the street, around the corner and disappeared.

"Whew!" Rex Craig exploded. "We're lucky we didn't get our throats cut!"

"I wonder why they didn't ask for our money?" said Ahmed.

"I don't know why, but I appreciate it, believe me," said Craig.

They heard sobbing at their feet and suddenly realized they had completely forgotten Yusuf. His head was buried in his hands, and he was crying as if his heart would break.

Ahmed dropped to his knees and began talking to the Arab boy in soothing tones. Slowly, Yusuf calmed down and began to speak to Ahmed. After a few moments, Ahmed rose and said, "Yusuf tells me the man in the white *abbas* came and took Suji away."

"What?" Biff exploded. "How come?"

"He said it was obviously a horse from the royal stables and it could not possibly belong to a Nasrani unless he had stolen it."

"But what made him think it was mine?" asked Biff.

"Because Yusuf said you had ridden it. Either Yusuf thought it was yours, or the man assumed it was. I suppose the man took the horse to get revenge on you for taking his picture."

"Well, we're right back where we started," said Biff. "Suji gone again and so's the picture of the guy who took him. We have been cleaned out."

"Boys," said Rex Craig, "I think you better pack up your duds and let me take you back to Aramco City right now before you get in any more trouble."

"We cannot do that," said Ahmed. "We have Zenobia and we have Yusuf. We must return him to the tent of his father. Then Zenobia will take us home."

"Well, whatever you say, pals," said Rex Craig. "Personally, I'd just as soon get out of this section at this time of night. So if you're sure you'll be all right, I'll leave you now."

"We will be fine," said Ahmed

"Er, uh . . . I guess we will," said Biff, reluctant to see a friendly American face leave them. But he knew they couldn't possibly stuff Zenobia in the back seat of Craig's car, and they were honor bound to see that Yusuf got back to Sheikh Abdulla's encampment since the child had shown such loyalty in waiting for them all day and most of the night.

"Take care of yourselves," Rex Craig said, sliding behind the wheel of his car. He waved and took off up the street. When his red taillight had winked out around a corner, Ahmed said, "I think it best that we hurry from this neighborhood also."

"And the city too," Biff added. "This just hasn't been our day . . . *or* our town."

They prepared to mount, and this time, Biff was a little more expert. He landed facing forward. Ahmed flicked Zenobia's stern with the camel stick and she shuffled forward along the dark and silent street. Clogging along behind them came Yusuf on his donkey.

It took them twenty minutes to make their way past the shuttered shops, with Ahmed looking nervously behind them all the way. They skirted the camel market on the edge of town, and when the last palm tree had faded behind them and the familiar crunch of desert sand began to sound beneath Zenobiz's feet, Ahmed took one last, long look behind them and slowed the camel's pace to a slow jog.

"Why do you keep looking back?" Biff drawled. "We don't have anything left to steal now."

"Oh?" said Ahmed, reaching under his *abbas* and holding up a round black object. "What about this?"

It was the roll of film from Biff's camera.

CHAPTER XIII

Road to Riyadh

"YOU son of a gun!" Biff shouted, snatching at the roll of film. "Where did you get that?"

"Out of your camera, back at the jail." Ahmed smiled.

"While *you* had the camera!" Biff laughed. "After taking my picture."

"Yes. When the officer came demanding the camera, I quickly removed the roll and hid it in my *abbas*."

"You figured if the policeman found the camera, we would at least have the film."

"Yes," said Ahmed.

"What if he had found the camera and then discovered the film was missing. What then?"

"I was going to handle that when the time came," Ahmed answered.

"But how come you didn't tell me?" Biff demanded.

"As you said to Rex Craig," said Ahmed, "it's a long story. I thought if somebody made another attempt to get your camera, it might be a good idea for the film to be somewhere else. And if you didn't know about it, that would be one less to worry about the scheme."

"Well, well, well!" Biff laughed. "This puts a different light on everything. We're back in business again. Now all we've got to do is get these pictures to our fathers and let them go to work on the case." He snapped his fingers. "But they're in Riyadh. How far is that?"

"Two days' ride," said Ahmed.

"Two days!" Biff groaned. "But we don't know how long they are going to be in Riyadh."

"I was told on the phone they would be gone three days," said Ahmed.

"Then we could catch them," said Biff. He paused and looked down at the camel saddle. "Oh, oh," he sighed. "How about saddle bags, water bags, and so on?"

"I believe we could get those from Sheikh Abdulla," said Ahmed.

"I wish there were some other way to go," said Biff.

"There is," said Ahmed. "The railroad goes there."

"How much money have you got?" Biff asked.

"Only a few riyals," said Ahmed. "Not enough for fare."

"I wonder about the *sheikh,*" said Biff. "We could pay him back."

"I doubt that the *sheikh* would have much money. Bedouins do not require much, nor do they carry much with them. At any rate, I would be reluctant to expose ourselves on the train. When our friends find they have the camera but not the film, they might come looking for us."

"True," said Biff. "And they might be rough about it. I have a hunch the picture on this roll is the key to a really big plot—or should I say *two* pictures. There's the man in the white *abbas* on here too. I think if we can put the finger on who he is, we will be on the way to solving this mystery."

"We might!" said Ahmed.

"Might!" exclaimed Biff. "What suspect have we got except him?"

"Well," Ahmed began, "the man who took Suji cannot hide so noble a horse in this country. I will find him—when this other business is finished."

"Sure you will!" said Biff enthusiastically. "So let's put ol' Zenobia in high gear and get to Sheikh Abdulla's camp."

Ahmed looked back over his shoulder and called, "Yusuf?"

A small voice answered from the darkness, and Biff glanced back to see the little Arab boy on his donkey trotting along behind them.

Ahmed whacked Zenobia's flank and the camel increased her speed across the silvery desert toward the southern horizon. Biff felt a chill to the air, and it grew colder as they rode.

When they arrived at Sheikh Abdulla's encampment, the campfires had died to white coals; but at the sound of their animals' hoofs, heads began to pop out of tents and as the boys reined to a halt in front of the *sheikh*'s tent, Abdulla himself stepped into the moonlight and hailed them.

They dismounted and Ahmed began to explain that they had been delayed by a little trouble in Madyab. He made it so short that even though he spoke in Arabic, Biff knew he wasn't going into great—and perhaps embarrassing—detail. When he was through, the *sheikh* asked what had happened to Suji. Ahmed put his arm around Yusuf's shoulder and gently explained what had happened. Yusuf was crying softly as Ahmed told the story. Abdulla then made a long speech to Ahmed, and it sounded to Biff as though the assembled Arabs had seconded what he was saying.

"He says he is indebted to us since Yusuf was responsible for the loss of Suji. He asks what we want in payment."

"Tell him we'll settle for saddle bags, water, and a little chow." Biff grinned.

Ahmed turned to the group of Arabs and with great humility and a reassuring pat on Yusuf's back, made a short speech in Arabic. When Ahmed finished, the *sheikh* gave orders to a couple of his tribesmen, and they scurried off to a nearby tent, quickly returning with two bulging saddle bags, a water skin, and food.

"I told the *sheikh* we would travel tonight. Is that satisfactory to you?" asked Ahmed. "It would be cooler."

Biff shivered. "Cool is right. I never thought I'd be looking for an overcoat in Arabia."

The *sheikh* saw Biff shivering and snapped his fingers at the two tribesmen, and after a brief order they returned with two wool burnooses.

The boys donned the garments, mounted Zenobia, and offered their hands to the *sheikh*. He shook Biff's, but held on to Ahmed's and drawing close, whispered in his ear for a few moments. Ahmed nodded and with a final wave, tapped Zenobia's neck and they were under way.

When they had left the glow of the campfires, Ahmed was able to see the stars clearly. He pointed to one he called Karameneh and another which he identified as Saramese and told Biff that by staying between them they would arrive at Riyadh.

"So much for navigation," said Biff. "Now what about the little secret Sheikh Abdulla whispered in your ear?"

"He was telling me some gossip he heard in the camel market," said Ahmed.

"Not more about our friend in the white *abbas?*"

"Yes," said Ahmed. "He has been active among all the tribes, arousing them against the oil companies, offering them jobs if they will help dry up the oil."

"Anybody accept?"

"The Shararat," said Ahmed. "Carrying cargo on their camels."

"What kind of cargo?" Biff inquired.

"They didn't know. It was just some boxes," said Ahmed, "but they didn't know what was in them."

"I can guess, though, can't you?" said Biff.

"Yes," said Ahmed. "Now I am sorry we didn't have time to get a longer look at that machine in the minaret."

They rode along silently. After about a minute Ahmed cleared his throat and said, "Biff, I have something to say which may offend you."

"Well, it's your turn." Biff laughed. "I've done nothing but make misery for you all day. What is it?"

"Well," said Ahmed hesitantly, "I believe it is possible we spent time trailing the wrong suspect."

"Oh?" said Biff with the trace of a smile in his voice. "You have another candidate?"

"Yes," said Ahmed, "and I hesitate to mention him because he is a countryman of yours, but—"

"Rex Craig?" Biff laughed. "I agree with you."

"You do?" said Ahmed. "When did you start thinking it might be Craig?"

"Think might be the wrong word," said Biff. "Feel might be a better word. I've just got a feeling about the man."

"When did this start?" asked Ahmed.

"Well, you remember back at the jail I said that it seemed kind of strange the Hambasah would try to grab my camera outside the mosque for no apparent reason . . . except that we had just left Craig."

"But we hadn't told Craig about what we had in the camera," said Ahmed.

"I know," said Biff. "That's why I've got to say I *feel* as though he knew, because I can't figure out how he possibly *could* know."

"I have somewhat the same problem with my feeling also," said Ahmed.

"Where did you start suspecting?" asked Biff.

"Tonight," said Ahmed, "when Craig led us so conveniently into the hands of the Hambasah so they could steal your camera—but not our money."

"I guess I was so scared my feelers weren't working then," said Biff. "But it takes us right back to where we started. How could the Hambasah or *anyone* know we had that picture?"

"I don't know," said Ahmed, "but if our feelings about Craig are right, what about the man at the mosque?"

"He's still a logical suspect," said Biff. "After all, it would be pretty coincidental for a man in the same kind of *abbas* and driving the same kind of car as the man at Al Thaza to show up in Madyab at the very time our friend in the white *abbas* said he was going to be there, now wouldn't it?"

"So it would," said Ahmed.

"So now where are we?" asked Biff.

"Too far from Riyadh," said Ahmed. "I wish we were there with our fathers right now."

"So do I," said Biff, settling into his burnoose. "Set this camel for about eight miles an hour and wake me when we get there."

"But I wish to talk some more," Ahmed protested.

"Talk to Zenobia." Biff yawned. "I just went off the air."

"Good night?"

"Good night."

CHAPTER XIV

Royal Ruckus

RIYADH was a city where the centuries clashed. Camels and Cadillacs competed for the right-of-way on dirt streets which led past towering buildings of concrete and chrome. Donkeys hauled steel drums full of water to sell at the edge of a new jet airfield. Women, swathed in silk-like blue cocoons, peered out from behind their veils at women in bright, off-the-shoulder frocks. Bedouin pilgrims with tangled hair and goatees nudged each other and made fun of pomaded and manicured men in cream-colored suits and narrow Italian shoes. The scaly white houses along the narrow old alleys were being engulfed by the steadily encroaching tide of new apartments—homes demanded by the new generation of Arabs, who had cut the ties with their desert forebears. And everywhere, the horns sounded. Zenobia's ears twitched and she mewed uncomfortably at the cacaphony.

The King's palace dominated the city's skyline despite its mud-brick construction. It was a collection of drab, formless structures which apparently had just grown as the urge moved the succession of rulers who had dwelt in it. The buildings were connected by bridges in order that the palace occupants could move from section to section without descending to the street.

On the roof of the palace gleamed a huge, revolving spotlight which operated twenty-four hours a day; casting its great beam out into the desert for mile upon mile—lighting the way to the palace for the desert nomad who might wish to visit his king.

As the boys neared the palace, they decided the main entrance must be where the red-turbaned, barefooted guards in khaki uniforms were standing. There seemed nowhere else to tie Zenobia save in the parking lot, so they tied her to the fence beside a tiny blue sports car, and entered the great, ornate doorway.

They started down a long, carpeted hall, its length cut by short flights of steps every few feet. There were intersecting halls and at each one, Ahmed stopped and peered down its length to see what might lie that way. They would occasionally pass robed figures with sheafs of papers in their hands, and Ahmed identified them as king's ministers on their way about the complicated business of running Saudi Arabia's mushrooming economy.

They were so busy examining the sights of the palace, they turned a corner without looking and with a hard bump, ran into a young man hurrying along the hall.

Ahmed's mouth dropped open, and a broad smile lit his face. "Your Royal Highness!" he exclaimed.

"Ahmed, *effendi!*" exclaimed the young man. He reached out and grasped Ahmed's hand. He wore a silk brocade skull cap and a white shirt, buttoned at the neck and tieless. He wore the shirt outside his pants and Biff noticed they were expensive European-type slacks. On his feet were tennis shoes.

"Your Royal Highness, may I present my friend Biff Brewster," said Ahmed with a wave of his hand. "Biff, this is Prince Hussein, my blood brother!"

So at last Biff had seen him—the prince whose life Ahmed had saved with transfusions of his blood. He thrust out his hand to shake the prince's and noted a firm, calloused grip, evidence of an outdoorsman.

"An American?" asked the prince and when Biff nodded, he asked, "How are the Mets doing this year?"

Biff laughed out loud at the unexpected question.

"Ahmed and I haven't had much time to worry about the Mets the last couple of days," he answered. "Have we, Ahmed?"

"True," said Ahmed. "And I am glad we met the prince—he might use his influence to get us an audience with someone of authority on oil matters."

"Oil matters?" said the prince. "Apparently, everyone in the kingdom is interested in oil matters today. We have two engineers from Aramco City with the King and his ministers now," he said.

"Our fathers," said Ahmed.

"Your fathers?" exclaimed the prince. "And now you wish an audience? Why?"

Ahmed took a deep breath and told the young prince the whole tale including the adventure at the minaret, the riot in Madyab, their incarceration, the stealing of Biff's camera and their flight from Madyab to Riyadh in order to present their photographic evidence to whoever might be interested.

"Now, all we need is find a place to develop these pictures," said Biff.

"You need search no farther," said the prince with a smile. "Photography is my hobby. Come, we'll have them developed in no time."

They followed him through a maze of corridors, down half a dozen flights of steps to a part of the palace set aside for living quarters.

Arriving at his photo lab, the prince asked for the film and upon receiving it, proceeded to his darkroom to develop the negatives.

"I think we should get word to our fathers that we are here," Biff remarked.

"Perhaps the prince will arrange that for us," said Ahmed.

In a few minutes, the prince pushed the door open, switched on his lights, and told them to come into the darkroom. He placed the film in the developing liquid as the boys crowded close to him, and they saw an image begin to appear on the paper.

First came the shot of Biff in the jail at Madyab, posing foolishly in front of the filthy bunk. Then the mirage, hazy and unreal. A second later, their hearts beat faster as the scene in front of the mosque began to melt into view. It was a perfect shot, all right—but a perfect shot of Ahmed, standing in front of the man in the white *abbas* and obscuring his face completely.

"Well, if that isn't tough luck!" Biff moaned. "Now, if anything has happened to that shot in the minaret—"

But nothing had happened to that shot. It was perfect. On it, they could see the head of the man in the white *abbas*, bent over and tracing a design in the sand. In the foreground, they could see the mysterious machine, its every detail in perfect focus. Now that they had a chance to study it quietly and calmly, they were all agreed that they had never seen any piece of oil equipment quite like it. They studied the design the man had drawn in the sand and were quick to agree that it was a rough sketch of the Ghawar oil field. Its ink-blot shape was unmistakable to anyone in the Arabian oil business.

"We can study it much better after enlargement," said the prince. "I shall do that in a moment." The prince lifted the print from the developer, wet and dripping. He hung it by a clothespin to a line nearby and turned on a fan.

"It should be dry shortly," he said. "Meanwhile I believe we should set things in motion to get you an audience with someone upstairs so you may tell your story."

They followed him from the darkroom and down the hall to his quarters. He invited them to be seated as he picked up the phone and spoke into it. The room was much like an American student's room, with pennants on the wall, a radio on the night table, and various other effects to indicate that the young prince had definitely been affected by western influences.

After a moment the prince hung up the phone and said, "We are in luck. The Minister of Finance, Abdul Azziz, will be free in a moment. He has the King's confidence. Whatever we tell him will get to the King."

The prince rose and led them from his quarters. "We can get the print after it's dry," he said. "If we wait, we may miss the audience with the minister. He is a very busy man."

The boys followed the prince through the maze of corridors again, and he soon led them to a large reception room whose walls were ornately decorated with colorful Arabesque designs. Along the east wall, was an alcove, highly ornamented and covered with fancy Arabic calligraphy. Ahmed explained that this was called the Qiblah, or direction of Mecca, so that visitors who were in the palace during prayer times would know which way to direct their prayers. Biff had become convinced that of all the countries he had visited, religion played a more prominent part in everyday life here in Saudi Arabia than anyplace else on earth.

The reception secretary informed the prince that the finance minister had a visitor in his office but should not be too long. He invited them to take seats along the wall. A few seconds later, a buzzer sounded on the secretary's desk. The prince rose expectantly, anticipating it to be a summons to enter. The secretary shook his head at the prince, hung up, and explained that the finance minister was sending him on an errand and that he would return presently. The secretary disappeared down the long hall and the three were left alone in the big reception room.

The minutes ticked by, and Biff's mind began to wander over the strange sequence of events which had led him in so short a time from a high school classroom in Indianapolis to the palace of the King of Arabia. It had certainly been a troubled path which led here—and all of it starting with a lost horse. That had been what the American reporter, Rex Craig, had remarked right after he had bailed them out of jail. It occurred to Biff that Craig had been unusually obliging about that—suspiciously obliging, one might say, especially since he had led them right to a rendezvous with the Hambasah and the other three Arabs who had relieved them of his camera.

Biff glanced over at Ahmed and knew the Arab boy must be thinking some of the same thoughts he was. He leaned over and whispered, "I wonder where Suji is right now?"

Ahmed started to answer, but with his mouth half open he stopped and stared into space for a moment, then slowly began to smile. "That's the key," he said. "That's how Craig knew we had been at the minaret."

"Suji?"

"Yes," said Ahmed. "If he knew or had been told that the Hambasah had a golden horse at the minaret he would know Suji was that horse since golden Arabians are rare. So if *we* had him we would have had to have been at the minaret also."

"So far, so good," Biff admitted. "But how could he know we took any picture at the minaret?"

"He saw you with that camera at Aramco City, he saw you with it at Madyab. He could assume you were carrying it at Al Thaza. If you were at the minaret there was a good chance you might have seen what was inside and taken a picture of it—especially since both our fathers are connected with the oil business and any machine like that would arouse our suspicions."

The prince leaned over and murmured, "What's this deep, dark plot you're discussing?"

"We've got a red-hot suspect in the case of the falling oil pressure." Biff grinned. "And we're just comparing notes." He stopped suddenly. "Notes . . ." he repeated.

"Notes!" exclaimed Ahmed.

"That's it!" said the boys simultaneously.

"What's it?" demanded the prince.

"Notes," Biff cried. "Ahmed made notes of what he was going to tell our dads on the phone. If Craig got a peek at those he would know we had been at the minaret, listening in!"

"He did get a peek, Biff," exclaimed Ahmed. "He shook hands with me and knocked them to the floor, remember?"

"Of course," Biff replied. "And he knew if we were in the minaret listening we couldn't have missed seeing that gizmo when the man in the white *abbas* opened the door. It would be natural for me to take a picture to use as evidence for our dads."

"Then this man Craig might be the man in the white *abbas*," said the prince.

"Except that we've *got* a man in a white *abbas*," Biff replied. "And the man we've got, the man at the mosque—fits the picture of the man at the minaret better than Craig does."

"Not necessarily," said Ahmed. "We didn't actually see the face of the man at the minaret. So it *could* have been Craig."

"Yes, it's possible, I suppose," said Biff, "but the fellow at the minaret had darker skin than Craig's—exactly like the fellow at the mosque, in fact. And too, I can't imagine where an American like Craig would learn to *sprechen ze Arabic* like that fellow we overheard at the minaret. He could really rattle it."

"Of course the skin color could easily be a dye," said the prince, "but I've never heard any American who was ever able to master Arabic without butchering it horribly."

"No wonder." Biff laughed. "You use talking muscles we don't even have."

His two Arab companions laughed and they lapsed again into silence. Finally they heard a sound just beyond the ornate doors leading to the office within. Then the big doors opened, revealing a small anteroom separating the inner office from the reception room. At the sound of footsteps they looked up casually. A slim form stepped into view, and Biff's throat went tight.

It was Rex Craig.

"Hello, boys," he said calmly.

Biff decided immediately that if Rex Craig were in on this oil plot, he was the coolest plotter he had ever seen. "Hello, Mr. Craig," he said. "How's the uh—news business." Biff had paused deliberately to see its effect on Craig.

Rex Craig didn't bat an eye. "Oh, fine." He smiled and looked at Ahmed. "Ever find your horse?" he asked.

"No. . . . no," said Ahmed dully. He too seemed dazed by the reporter's casualness.

There was a sudden buzzing at the reception secretary's desk.

"That's for us," said the prince. "We'd better hurry, boys."

"Yeah." Rex Craig laughed. "The finance minister is a busy man these days. They're boilin' about oil around here." He strode to the hat rack, removed his panama, and patted it on his head. "Well, I hope he helps you find your horse," he said.

The boys followed the prince through the door to the anteroom, and he closed it quickly behind them. "Is that the man you suspect?" he whispered.

"Yes," Biff answered. "Only now I'm not so darn sure about our suspicions. That's the coolest guy I've ever seen."

"Could you be wrong?" asked the prince. "I mean, would he dare come here if he knew you had the photographs you spoke of? How would he know but what you had taken a picture of *him* at the minaret? He couldn't know you had not seen his face."

Biff hadn't thought of that, probably because they had never seriously considered that Craig could have been the man in the white *abbas* until a moment ago.

The prince led them into a large office marked with great Arabic letters, and Biff looked inquisitively toward the big desk in front of the windows. His mouth went suddenly dry.

Seated behind the desk was the man in the white *abbas!*

CHAPTER XV

Tribal Council

"YOUR Excellency," the prince began, "may I present the young American, Biff Brewster, and an old friend of mine, Ahmed Kadir. Boys, His Excellency, Abdul Azziz, Minister of Finance for His Majesty's government."

The man in the white *abbas* jumped to his feet and let out a low growl which rose three octaves as he sputtered, "These two infidels! Get them out—out of my office!"

There was no doubt in Biff's mind now. It was the man in the white *abbas* whose picture he had snapped in front of the mosque at Madyab.

"But Your Excellency," the prince stammered, "I don't understand. These young men have a photograph of extreme importance to you."

"I know of the photograph!" Abdul Azziz boomed. "He took it of me in front of the mosque at Madyab!"

The prince looked at the boys with a startled expression. "Is this true?" he asked. "Was this the man in the white *abbas* of whom you spoke?"

"He's the one we followed in Madyab," Biff stuttered, "because we thought he was the same one we had seen at the minaret."

The prince turned back to Abdul Azziz. "Your Excellency, this can all be explained," he pleaded. "You see, these boys have proof of a plot against the Ghawar oil field, and they have a photograph which may help solve the mystery of the falling pressure in the field."

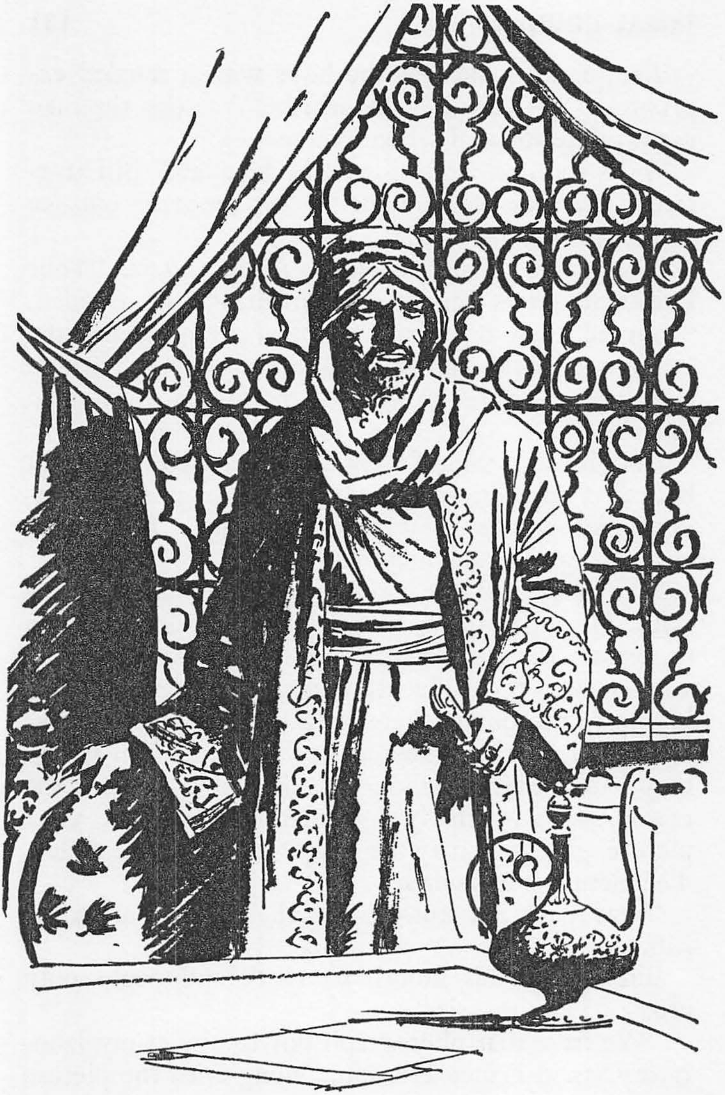
Abdul Azziz sank slowly into his swivel chair. "I have firm convictions regarding personal photographs, as you know," the minister said sullenly. "The Koran has rules against such pictures."

"But sir," said the prince, "there is an explanation." He edged toward the minister's desk and began to explain the story as the boys had told it to him, starting with their adventure at the minaret and leading up to the point where they had seen the minister and thought he was the man in the white *abbas* whom they had overheard talking at Al Thaza. "That is the reason, sir, why this young man tried to take your picture. But you may be happy to know he failed. The picture was spoiled."

"You speak the truth?" Abdul Azziz demanded of Biff.

Biff opened his mouth to speak and could only croak, "Yes, sire—sir."

"We have that photograph downstairs in my laboratory," said Prince Hussein, "along with the picture



Abdul Azziz leaped to his feet. "Then let us be about it," he snapped of which I spoke—a picture of a strange machine which might be connected with the problem of the falling oil pressure."

Abdul Azziz looked from the prince to the boys, then glanced at his wrist watch. "I have ten minutes before I must join the conference on the matter still under way in the King's council room. Complete your whole story."

Biff nodded at Ahmed, and Ahmed went on with the story, while Abdul Azziz stared at him, rocking slowly back and forth in his swivel chair. Biff wondered what thoughts might be going on behind those oriental eyes—he wondered if indeed they were talking to the very man they had overheard at the Al Thaza minaret. If he were the man, he was certainly cool. But so had Rex Craig been cool. Of course, Abdul Azziz had far more opportunity and perhaps some more devious reason to be part of a plot against the oil fields than did Rex Craig. Or, they might be in it together. Rex Craig had been in here with him. At the moment, Biff wasn't sure of anything.

The finance minister stopped rocking, leaned forward, and said, "This must *not* be the product of your vivid, juvenile imagination. I have no time to waste on such nonsense."

"The way to decide for yourself, sir, is to come look at the photograph in my laboratory," said the prince.

Abdul Azziz leaped to his feet. "Then let us be about it," he snapped.

"Yes, Your Excellency," said the prince. "This way." He led the boys and the finance minister back through the maze of halls toward his photographic laboratory. On the way, he explained to Abdul Azziz that it would be much better if they had an enlargement of the picture, but in its present size he would be able to see enough detail to satisfy himself that it was a significant picture.

They hurried through the door of the laboratory and looked toward the line upon which they had hung the wet print.

The picture was gone.

The prince and the boys looked frantically around on the floor, thinking it might have fallen from its clip. They looked in the developer. But the picture was nowhere to be found.

Biff snapped his fingers.

"Rex Craig!" he exclaimed.

"What about Mr. Rex Craig?" the finance minister asked impatiently.

"Your Excellency," said Biff nervously, "I know what we have told you sounds fantastic, especially without the picture to support us, and what I am about to tell you sounds even more fantastic—"

Abdul Azziz looked irritably at his watch.

"I think it was Rex Craig who stole our picture," said Biff.

Abdul Azziz heaved a disgusted sigh. "Come, come," he growled. "First it is mysterious pictures, then plots to steal them, then accusations against accredited news correspondents—and no proof for any of it."

"But we think we have proof," said Biff. He launched into the bits of circumstantial evidence which he and Ahmed had gathered, trying to condense it for the impatient minister of finance. When he had summarized their theories, he concluded by saying, "So, I'm certain he must somehow have learned where this photograph was and came down and stole it."

"Perhaps by eavesdropping," Ahmed suggested.

"Yes," said the prince. "We left him out in the reception room alone. While your secretary was out of the room, he could have crept into the anteroom and listened to our conversation."

Again the finance minister glanced impatiently at his watch. "I must go," he announced.

"Sir, will you send out an order to have Rex Craig picked up?" Biff pleaded. "He can't have gone far."

"Picked up!" Abdul Azziz exclaimed. "Young man, are you mad? On what charge? He is a correspondent of *Global News*—arrest him and he would send out stories denouncing us as savages—anti-American and all that nonsense. No, I cannot do such a thing. You have no facts. Facts are what we need to solve this oil crisis—which the King is expecting me to discuss with him and the two engineers right now!" He turned on his heel and started for the door.

"Your Excellency," the prince called after him. "Would you do *one* thing?"

Abdul Azziz stopped and turned around. "Well," he demanded, "what is it?"

"Would you send someone to Al Thaza oasis to see if there is such a machine as the boys describe in the minaret?"

This brilliantly simple suggestion had not occurred to either Biff or Ahmed.

"Will you, sir?" the prince pleaded.

"Nonsense!" Abdul Azziz growled. He stalked out of the room leaving the boys staring at each other. One second later, the finance minister stuck his head back in the door.

"Your horse is in the Royal Stable," he snapped to Ahmed.

"Did you hear, Biff!" Ahmed exclaimed joyfully as the finance minister disappeared. "I was afraid to ask him about it."

"Okay, go see if he's all right." Biff grinned. "We'll wait for you."

"Thank you," said Ahmed. "I know my way." He hurried out of the lab, and Biff turned to the prince. "I wonder if Abdul Azziz will send someone to check on the minaret at Al Thaza?"

"I don't know," said the prince. "After all, we couldn't furnish him proof of your story."

Biff could sense the prince's support weakening so he said quickly, "I've got another idea. Why not check on Rex Craig? He might not be a correspondent for *Global News* at all."

"What makes you think—" the prince began, but before he could continue, a high, familiar wail drifted to their ears. The call of the *muezzin* summoning the Moslem faithful to noontime prayer.

"I must be excused," said the prince.

"Of course," Biff answered.

The prince bowed and left the laboratory. Biff sank into a chair to try and sort out all the factors in the strange mystery. He couldn't really blame Abdul Azziz for having no faith in their story, but if only he would send someone to the minaret to investigate, Biff mused. Then they would have something concrete to go on. At the moment, however, he knew that every Moslem head in the palace was bowed in prayer. He wondered if the noon prayer call had broken up the meeting involving his dad. It occurred to him that they still hadn't notified their fathers of their presence in the palace.

A few minutes later the prince returned, and Ahmed was with him. Biff asked if it would be possible to get a message to their dads, and the prince said he had a better suggestion. "We'll go where they are right now . . . or should be. The dining hall."

He led them through the maze of corridors to a long dining area with carved wood doors. Biff could see a large group of Arabs in the room. In the center of the room were thick carpets covered with literally hundreds of dishes of exotic foods. The Arabs were arranging themselves in cross-legged fashion around the edges of the rugs, preparing to eat, and Biff noticed there was not a knife or fork in sight. Here, in the King's palace as in the humblest Bedouin tent, one ate with his fingers. And to his considerable joy, Biff saw that one of the figures attacking the food with vigor was his dad—Tom Brewster. Beside him sat Khalil Kadir. The prince told the boys to go ahead and join their fathers for he wanted to circulate a bit and maybe find out what was going on.

The boys squeezed in beside their fathers and enjoyed a quiet reunion.

"We didn't know you hadn't returned to Aramco City," Tom Brewster said. "We were considerably surprised to hear your names mentioned in the meeting just now."

"Yes, what is this *plot* you have been telling the finance minister about?" Khalil Kadir asked. "It sounds as if you two have been getting into mischief."

"Well, sort of." Biff grinned. "But we won't bore you with the details right now. Just tell us what you think. Do you think we have something? Is there anything anybody could do to cause the drop in oil pressure?"

"You're referring to that mysterious machine Abdul Azziz spoke of—the one in the minaret on the edge of the Ghawar field?"

"Yes. Could it be used to affect the whole field pressure?"

"Not by itself, no," said Tom Brewster.

"You mean if there were more than one, it would be possible?"

"Yes," said Tom Brewster calmly. "If somehow you could ring the entire field with drills and then slant drill into the pool."

"Slant drill? What's that?"

"Drill on a slant instead of straight down. It's done all the time in cases where it is impossible to drill straight down into an oil pool—because of water or swamp on the surface over the pool."

"Then it *is* possible this funny gizmo could be tapping the main pool!" Biff exclaimed.

"Given enough drills, it could be done. Provided. . . ." He paused. "Provided the drills were close enough to the pool—say, within a mile or so, and assuming the driller had enough time—say, a few years."

The bottom fell out of Biff's carefully constructed case. "Years?" he groaned.

"Unless there was a drill employed that is far beyond anything we know, and it would have to be something revolutionary. Drilling is a slow and tedious process, son," said Tom Brewster. "I'm afraid your theory about a plot involving the mysterious machine at Al Thaza doesn't hold up."

Biffs spirits sank.

"We are so desperate for an answer to this oil pressure problem, we even discussed the information you gave to the finance minister," said Tom Brewster. "We decided it did not hold water."

"I see," said Biff. "Well, *Kismet*. . . . eh, Ahmed?"

They shrugged and began to help themselves to the myriad dishes spread out before them. Biff started out determined to have a little bit of everything in sight. But no matter how little he took from each dish, he found that dipping in the oil-soaked rice and forming the little balls soon filled him to capacity.

In a few minutes, he noticed the Arab ministers begin to drift out of the dining hall, and his father whispered that the meeting was about to start again. He told Biff that he had no idea whether he would have to stay over again that evening, but would be in touch with him later. The hall was now empty save for Ahmed and Biff.

"Wonder what happened to the prince?" Biff remarked.

"The prince is right here!" that young man announced, hurrying through the door, "and full of fresh and vital information!"

"Oh? What about?" asked Biff.

"There *has* been an effort afoot to arouse the tribes to rebel against the oil companies," said the prince, beaming. "I was told this in confidence by a minor clerk. And each of the tribes is affected by the drilling activities of the company," he announced. "This is beginning to take shape and to look more and more like a plot."

Biff shook his head. "My dad says it couldn't be done inside of a few years. So if there is some plot, it appears it doesn't have anything to do with oil. Revolution maybe, but not oil."

The prince shook his head. "Awhile ago, I was beginning to disbelieve," he said, "but I am certain now that there *is* something afoot. Especially after talking to the finance minister's reception secretary."

"Oh? About what?" Biff asked.

"You were right," said the prince. "Rex Craig did linger in the anteroom. The secretary found him there when he returned from the errand he had been on. The reporter tried to pretend he was just leaving, but the secretary assures me he saw Craig listening at the door."

Biff and Ahmed took a new interest in the matter once more.

"You see," beamed the prince, "it is good to have friends in the palace to tell you things."

"But where does this information put us?" asked Ahmed.

The prince looked thoughtful. "I have an idea," he said, looking at his watch.

"While you're having the idea, let me ask you something," said Biff. "Did the finance minister send anybody to Al Thaza to have a look at the gizmo in the minaret?"

"No," said the prince. "And that's my idea. *We* shall go."

"Us?" said Biff in surprise.

"Yes. It is not far," said the prince.

"Oh, not another camel ride in that hot sun!" Biff moaned.

"Camel ride, nothing," said the prince. "There is absolutely no use in being a prince unless you can go first class. We will Cadillac to Al Thaza."

CHAPTER XVI

Hunch Play

"OH HO! oh hee! It's a prince's life for me!" Biff leaned back on the Cadillac cushions and sang at the top of his lungs.

"I've heard camels that sang better," jeered the prince with a wink at Ahmed, sitting beside him.

"Go ahead. . . . criticize. I don't mind," shouted Biff from the back seat of the luxurious car. "In this atmosphere, I can take anything. Air-conditioning, tinted glass, reclining seats . . . and to top it off, a radio telephone!" He fondled the mauve-colored phone hanging on its hook at fingertip reach. "This is living!" He stared out at the desert through which they were speeding at seventy miles an hour. He looked back at the cloud of dust swirling in their wake and at a camel caravan off in the distance.

"You may not feel so much like singing when we get to Al Thaza," said Ahmed, over his shoulder.

"What if Rex Craig and a reception committee are there waiting for us?"

Biff snapped his fingers. "I knew there was something I forgot. Rex Craig! Is he really a *Global News* correspondent or not?"

"What makes you think he's not?" asked the prince.

"Nothing makes me think he's not," said Biff. "But if it turned out he isn't, wouldn't that kind of prove he's up to some monkey business?"

"I suppose so, but how could you find out?" asked Ahmed.

A fantastic yet logical idea began to form in Biff's mind. He took a deep breath and said, "Prince, why don't we call *Global News* and check on Rex Craig?"

The prince stole a look over his shoulder. "Call *Global News?* Where?"

Biff gulped. "In New York," he said, then waited for an explosion.

"All right," said the prince calmly.

"You mean it?" Biff sat up with a big, foolish grin on his face. "I can do it?"

"Why not? That's what phones are for," said the prince casually. "Ahmed, place his call with the radio telephone operator. They might not understand Biff."

Ahmed looked wide-eyed at Biff, shrugged, and reached for the phone. He waited a moment, then said something in Arabic, but he completed his order with the English words, "*Global News Service*, New York City, U. S. A." He added a few words in Arabic, hung up, and said, "The operator will get us back when the call is ready." The prince yawned, and

Biff and Ahmed doubled up with laughter. His nonchalance as they placed a call to New York City from the middle of the Arabian desert seemed as hilariously unlikely an occurrence as anything that had happened to them during this whole adventure.

When he finally stopped laughing, Biff straightened up and said, "Now about Al Thaza. What happens to this expedition if we get to the minaret and the gizmo isn't there?"

"Judging from the size of that machine in the photograph, it wouldn't be easy to pick it up and run off with it," said the prince.

"They carried it in, they can carry it out," said Biff.

"Why so pessimistic?" asked Ahmed.

"I don't know," said Biff. "Everything else has gone wrong since we tried to figure out this Operation Midraak." Biff looked at Ahmed. "Hey, maybe the prince knows what *midraak* means."

"That means escalator," said the prince.

"Escalator—there is no such word in Arabic," said Ahmed.

"True," answered the prince. "But this means steps going down. It is usually used in connection with *midraaj*, meaning steps going up. Together, they would mean steps going up and down . . . or escalator."

"Steps going down," Biff repeated. "That would describe a plot to reduce oil field pressure . . . step by step, wouldn't it?"

Ahmed and the prince agreed it might.

"Everything keeps adding up," said Biff. "But how come we aren't getting anywhere?"

"We are," said the prince. "We're getting closer to the turn-off for Al Thaza."

In a few minutes, the prince swung off the hard-dirt road onto a bumpy path which seemed to lead toward the sand dunes in the far distance.

"From here on, it's rough," said the prince. "We're on the old camel path from Al Thaza. Hasn't been used in twenty years. Let's hope there are no soft spots in it anywhere."

"Amen," mumbled Biff, "or should I say Allah be praised?"

They bumped and dipped along at reduced speed for about an hour. At last they saw the dull, gray buildings in the distance and then the slender minaret poking into the sky. There was not a sign of life in the deserted village, but the prince advanced on the place slowly, just in case. Creeping into the village, they drove down the main street, staring into the dead windows of the old houses, listening to the clapping of the splintered shutters swinging in the breeze. In a moment, they had reached the minaret. The prince got out first, Ahmed and Biff followed, and they stood and looked all around.

Slowly and deliberately, Biff led the way to the door of the minaret. With Ahmed's assistance, he yanked at the door wedged tight by drifting sand. Another yank and it flew open.

The minaret was empty. The machine was gone.

Biff's shoulders sagged. "Okay, so it was never here. It was a mirage," he groaned.

"Wait!" Ahmed pointed to the ground. "There are tracks here showing something was dragged from the minaret. They lead this way," he cried. They followed the trail and when they reached the firm spot in the sand, Ahmed pointed to some tire tracks. "It was loaded onto a vehicle with heavy desert tires," he said.

Biff and the prince stared down at the tracks. They followed them with their eyes as they headed out across the desert and disappeared in a northerly direction.

"How old are they, Ahmed?" asked Biff.

Ahmed walked along the trail made by the tires and studied them for a moment. "They are perhaps two days old," he said.

"Well, I'm afraid that's our case," said the prince dejectedly.

Biff slowly gazed in a wide arc toward the west, paused, and then dropped to one knee. "I've got one more idea," he said. He began to draw a rough, inkblot design in the sand. "That's the Ghawar oil field, okay?"

The prince and Ahmed kneeled beside him. "Yes?" they answered.

Biff made a rough X at the right-hand corner of the sketch. "This is the minaret here, right?"

"About five miles from the edge of the field, actually," said the prince.

"Okay," said Biff. "Now here is the old oasis of the Hambasah tribe, correct? Now where is the old stamping ground of Sheikh Abdulla's tribe, Ahmed?" he inquired.

"The Ruala? Here in the northwest," said Ahmed, putting his finger in the upper left-hand corner of the oil field sketch.

Biff drew an X there. "And the tribe that hired out to that rabble rouser?"

"The Shararat," said Ahmed. "Here." He pointed to the upper right-hand corner of the sketch. Again Biff drew an X. "And now where are the tribal lands belonging to those tribes you heard the rumors about this morning?" he asked the prince.

"The Banu-Sakhr, the Huwaytat, the Wuld-Ali, Aslam, Sabah, and the Shammar." He pointed to the area on the map where these tribes had domain. Biff finished putting X's in the sand around the oil field sketch, then smiled up at them. "What do you notice?" he asked.

"These lands completely surround the oil field," said the prince.

"Right," said Biff. "Indicating that whoever is behind a plot to sabotage the oil field is working on these tribes. Now why?"

"Stirring up rebellion, I would suppose."

"I don't think so," said Biff. "I think whoever is behind this just wants the cooperation of these tribes so he can get onto their lands and put down machines like the one we saw here in the minaret."

"For what purpose?" asked Ahmed. "Not to drill, surely. This one, for example, is too far from the oil field."

"I'll get to that in a second," said Biff. "Now suppose I'm right and he wants to set these gizmos out around the Ghawar field—ring it with these machines, whatever they are. He'd almost have to have the support or at least the permission of the tribes involved to do it, wouldn't he?"

"Yes, that's true, but—"

"Wait, let me finish," said Biff. "And summer would be the best time to set 'em out, because there isn't much desert travel in the summer. They wouldn't be as likely to be found by accident."

"But what harm could these machines do completely outside the oil field?" the prince asked.

"This is the hardest part to believe," said Biff. "What if they had a new, revolutionary kind of drill—one that could drill six times, ten times, a hundred times as fast as ordinary oil drills? And suppose they used them to slant drill into the main oil pool? Wouldn't that be the answer to the fluctuating pressure?"

"But what would be the object?" the prince asked. "Why would anyone do such a thing?"

"I don't know," said Biff simply.

All three stood up as the telephone in the car rang. "I'll get it," said Ahmed. He picked it up, said something in Arabic, then smiled and said in English, "Oh, excuse me—hold on, please." He handed the phone to Biff.

"Hello?" Biff said.

"Hello," said a voice at the other end. "This is MacCloud at *Global News*. Who *is* this?"

"This is Biff Brewster in Saudi Arabia," said Biff.

"Oh, sure. And I'm Napoleon at Waterloo," answered the voice on the phone.

"No, Mr. MacCloud, I'm serious." Biff laughed. "I *am* speaking from Saudi Arabia. I want to ask you about Rex Craig. Does Mr. Craig work for *Global News?*"

"Who's paying for this call?" the man asked suspiciously.

"It's not collect . . . don't worry," said Biff. "Please, can you tell me about Rex Craig?"

"Sure, we have a Rex Craig on the payroll," said the voice. "But I don't know how long he's gonna last."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Biff.

"His stuff. It's lousy," said the man named MacCloud. "Not like the old Craig at all. You can tell him that for me."

"I wish I could," said Biff. "Tell me, where do you contact him?"

"He cabled me saying that after today he would be at the Abadan Hotel in Dharan permanently," MacCloud replied.

"I see," said Biff. "Oh, would you tell me what he looks like?"

"He's a little shrimp of a guy with a face that only a mother could love," said the voice at *Global News.*

Biff's heart jumped. "Little, huh? And ugly?"

"You said it."

"Well, thank you, sir. That's all I wanted to know."

"You're calling all the way from Arabia just for that?" asked the man.

"That's right," said Biff brightly.

"Okay, pal, it's your dime," said the man. "Tell me—how's the weather in Saudi Arabia?"

"Cold and snowing," said Biff.

"Send me a hundred words, get pictures if possible, and I'll hire you instead of Craig," chuckled the man in New York.

"Sorry, got a job," said Biff. "Good-by now."

He hung up and slid out of the car seat. "Where's Dharan?" he inquired.

"On the Persian Gulf, why?" asked Ahmed.

"Persian Gulf," said Biff thoughtfully. "Did you hear any rumors about any rabble-rousing activity around that area from your informant at the palace, Prince?" he asked.

"No," said the prince. "In fact, it is unusually quiet there. In the past, we have had trouble with the pearl divers because prices on their pearls have dropped badly. But there has been nothing lately."

Biff pointed a finger at the top of the oil field sketch. "This end of the field where it runs into the Persian Gulf is the only place where there has been no trouble. But we know the field extends out under the gulf waters there, right?"

"Yes," said Ahmed. "There's no drilling there right now, however."

"Maybe there is and maybe there isn't," said Biff.

"What do you mean?" asked the prince.

"The man in New York proved to me that the man who calls himself Rex Craig is a fraud. The real Rex Craig is short and ugly. That hardly fits the Rex Craig we know."

"You asked about Dharan. What does that have to do with Craig?" the prince inquired.

"The man at *Global News* in New York said Craig cabled him that he would be in Dharan from now on . . . that's right near the Persian Gulf. That's the one place where a man might use an oil drill and not be detected doing it. He could hide it on a boat."

"Not an ordinary drill," said the prince. "That would be impossible to disguise."

"How about an extraordinary drill?" Biff asked.

"We're back to that," said the prince.

"Tell you what," said Biff, drawing a great big X at the top of the oil field sketch where the Persian Gulf would be. "I say our one chance to solve this business lies right there. We don't have a thing to take back to show the King or his ministers or our fathers, but maybe if we did a little snooping around Dharan and the Persian Gulf waters, we might find something that would interest them."

"What else can we do but go?" The prince smiled.

CHAPTER XVII

Payoff Dive

THE Abadan Hotel in Dharan was one of the city's newest structures, built since the metropolis had become the oil capital of the middle east. It overlooked the Persian Gulf and catered to the steady stream of oil company personnel who passed through this place on their way to the oil fields in the desert. In its air-conditioned, modern rooms, guests could observe the teeming activity of the busy harbor, watching vessels from ports the world over as they came to pick up their loads of Arabian oil.

Biff and Ahmed decided the aristocratic-looking prince would be the best one to inquire about Rex Craig, and the least likely to be recognized if by some chance, Craig was in the lobby.

In a few minutes, the prince returned to the car to reveal that Rex Craig had left instructions with the room clerk that he was not to be disturbed until eight that evening.

"It is five now. That gives us three hours to wait," said the prince, glancing at his watch.

"Whatever he has planned, he doesn't want to do it in the heat of day, I guess," said Biff. He looked out at the few people stirring in the blistering, humid heat and added, "I think he shows good judgment."

"I wonder what he does have planned for eight?" Ahmed asked.

"I don't know, but I hate to waste three hours doing nothing," said the prince. "In fact, I don't think we should."

"What do you suggest?" asked Biff.

The prince smiled. "My family keeps a launch here in Dharan. I suggest we take a tour of the Dharan waterfront area and pursue that clue Biff suggested—a boat which might contain an oil drill."

"Splendid," beamed Ahmed. "I could stand a cooling boat ride."

"Unfortunately, we can't all go," said the prince. "Someone should stay and make sure Craig doesn't sneak out on us."

"Yes, Ahmed," drawled Biff, "someone should stay—and guess who?"

Ahmed's face fell. "I know. You would be conspicuous with your blue Nasrani eyes, and the prince *has* to pilot the boat. I stay."

The prince opened the door of the car, and a wave of humid heat crept in. "Find an inconspicuous place in the lobby and keep watch on the elevator," he said. "If he should leave, follow him. If you are not here when we return, we will wait until you come back."

Ahmed slid out of the car and Biff said, "Don't get broiled on the way from here to there."

Ahmed gave him a wry grin and headed for the hotel entrance.

The prince put the car in motion and made for the dock area of the Dharan waterfront. At the dock, Biff was surprised to see a goodly number of trim launches owned, said the prince, by oil company personnel and the members of the royal family, who used them for recreation trips along the Arabian coast.

After gassing up, the prince headed for midharbor and began to wend his way among the vessels plying the waterfront. They sped beneath the bows of great tankers, set native *howdahs* bobbing in their wake and eased by fishing boats bringing in their loads from far out in the ocean. They cruised along for about a half hour, looking for vessels of a kind that might be used for oil-drilling purposes, but saw nothing which fitted the loose description they had in mind.

"I don't know how a boat would look 'suspicious,' " said Biff, "but that is the kind I am looking for. How about you, Prince?"

"I don't know what I'm looking for, to tell you the truth," the prince answered. "I know the ordinary well driller used on water is built on a platform one can see twenty miles off."

"I doubt if Craig would have anything that conspicuous." Biff smiled. "And if my hunch about his having some radically new sort of drill is correct, perhaps he wouldn't need anything like that."

He shaded his eyes and looked far out to sea. "What's that string of boats out there?" he asked.

"Pearl fishers," said the prince. "Not very likely candidates for what we're after. Too small."

"Why don't we go look anyway?" said Biff. "I've always wanted to see these pearl divers."

The prince shrugged and wheeled the launch about, heading for the small, black dots close to the horizon. As they sped closer and closer, the vessels began to take form and Biff picked up the binoculars lying before him. "Say, the water is alive with divers,"

"Each boat has about thirty divers operating off it," said the prince.

Biff studied the bobbing heads in the water and watched one of the divers being hauled aboard at the end of a rope. "He's got a basket in his hands," said Biff. "Full of oysters, I guess."

"Yes, he dives overboard, goes down about sixty to seventy feet, fills the basket with oysters and is hauled back. They say some of them can stay down without breathing for nearly three minutes."

Biff whistled softly and continued to stare through the binoculars at the collection of boats. Soon they were so close he could see without the glasses. A few of the divers were resting on the deck of the nearest vessel, and Biff could see they wore only loin cloths and nose clips. Most had leather thimbles on their fingers to protect their hands against the jagged oyster shells at the bottom.

Biff and the prince cruised slowly along past the string of vessels, studying their outlines. Most were ancient affairs, rusty and decrepit. Without exception, the ship's captain was clearly visible, watching the divers closely as they were hauled aboard, observing the oyster openings to make certain no diver secreted any treasure and failed to turn it in. Biff watched as one pearl was found, and he watched through the binoculars as the diver placed it on his big toe where it clung by its own moisture until a collector came along and plucked it from the toe, popped it into a little leather pouch and passed it on to the next man. Divers and ship's captains had waved at them cordially as they eased along, until they came to the last boat in the line. It was as old and decrepit as the rest, and as Biff turned his glasses on the bridge he was surprised to see that the captain of this vessel had binoculars trained on them. Suddenly, the man lowered the glasses and shouted at them.

"What's eating him?" Biff asked.

The prince listened for a moment and said, "He wants us to keep moving. He says we're attracting sharks."

Biff saw some of the divers begin to wave them off, and the prince gunned the boat engine. In a few seconds, they had left the pearl fishing fleet and were heading back to land.

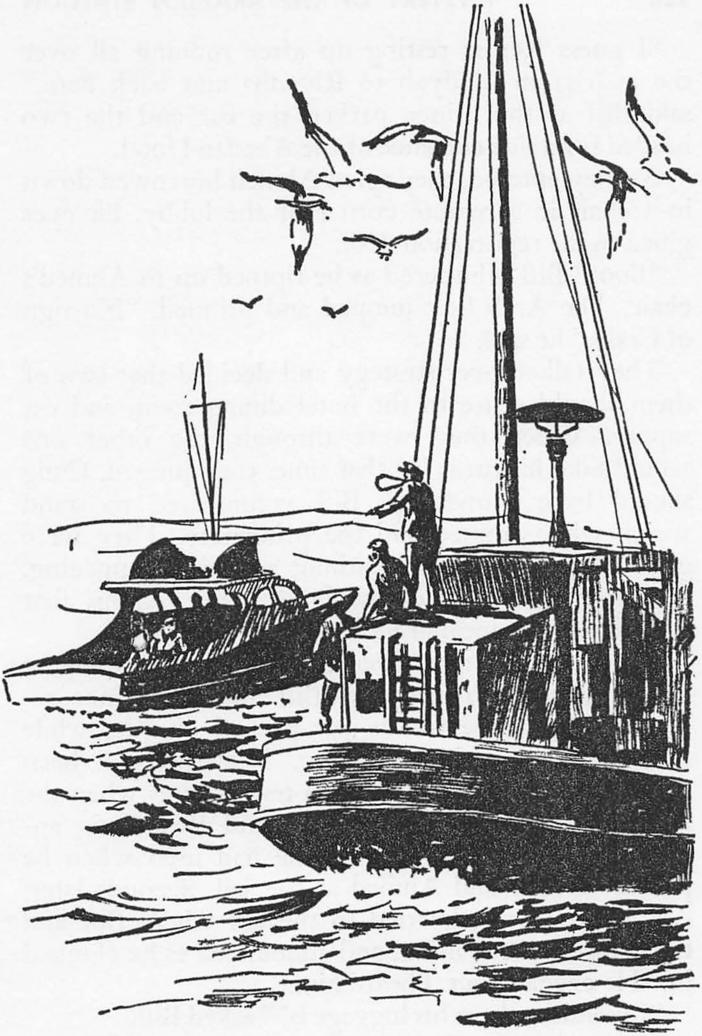
"Sharks—Brr," said Biff. "I don't blame them for being mad at us. When do they quit diving anyway?"

"Soon now," said the prince, looking westward toward the reddening sun. "They stay on the boats and return when the captain is satisfied with the take."

Biff looked back at the boats. "With all those divers, there wouldn't be much room left for an oil drill, would there?"

"I don't believe we'll find our drill aboard one of those, no," said the prince.

A half hour later, they eased into the Dharan dock and moored the prince's launch. In a few minutes, they were speeding back toward the Abadan Hotel. It was seven o'clock, leaving an hour until eight.



Suddenly the man lowered the glasses and shouted at them

"I guess Rex is resting up after running all over the map from Madyab to Riyadha and back here," said Biff as the prince parked the car and the two headed for a side entrance of the Abadan Hotel.

As they entered, they spied Ahmed burrowed down in a chair in a remote corner of the lobby, his eyes glued to the registration desk.

"Boo!" Biff whispered as he tiptoed up to Ahmed's chair. The Arab boy jumped and grinned. "No sign of Craig," he said.

They talked over strategy and decided that two of them should retire to the hotel dining room and eat supper. When they were through, the other one would take his turn. By that time, they judged, Craig should have shown up. Biff volunteered to stand watch while Ahmed and the prince ate. They were gone about a half hour without anything happening, then they stood watch while Biff enjoyed his first American-style meal in a long while.

They decided that three of them in the lobby at one time was too many, so Biff and the prince returned once more to the car parked outside, while Ahmed remained in the lobby. They had not been seated in the car for more than ten minutes when the front door of the hotel opened and Rex Craig appeared. He strode to the car he had used when he picked up Biff and Ahmed at the jail. Seconds later, Ahmed appeared, hurried to the car where Biff and the prince were waiting, and announced as he climbed in, "He checked out. I heard him."

"I wonder where his luggage is?" asked Biff.

"I heard him tell them to send it to the airport," said Ahmed. "Flight thirty-seven, Middle East Airlines."

Rex Craig's car pulled out from the parking space and after a second or two, the prince guided the Cadillac in behind him.

"He can't be going to the airport or he would have taken his luggage with him," said Biff.

"I would think so," said the prince, "but let us wait and see."

They proved to be right. Rex Craig wasn't headed for the airport. Instead, he drove straight toward the place which Biff and the prince had just left! To their astonishment, he not only stopped at the same dock, but he got out and strode to a launch parked right next to the one in which they had just ridden.

"Boy, wouldn't that have been a meeting if we'd been about an hour later getting in!" said Biff.

They watched as Rex Craig climbed into the launch, started it, and backed out of the slip. The pale moon was dappling the water now, and as they hurried down to the dock, they could follow the journey of Craig's boat quite easily.

"He's heading straight out to sea," said Biff.

"Shouldn't we follow?" asked Ahmed.

The prince looked up at the bright moon. "We couldn't follow him for two minutes before he would know it, in this bright moonlight," said the prince. "Let's wait and maybe we can stay far enough behind so he won't be aware of anything."

They watched the boat growing smaller and smaller out on the water before the prince took off in pursuit. He could not travel without lights for fear of running down someone or being run down by a bigger boat in the crowded waters. But they knew the moment they got into less trafficked waters, they would expose themselves to the gaze of Rex Craig. They did the best they could, and with Biff manning the binoculars, they watched Craig's boat speeding along far ahead of them.

"By golly," said Biff, "I think he's heading toward the pearl fishing fleet." He strained to see the fast disappearing boat. Suddenly, he dropped the glasses and stared ahead unaided. "He's turning as if to come back," Biff declared. "I think he is wise to us."

The prince slowly turned the boat to port and they watched as Rex Craig's boat continued to turn back toward them. Soon it had completed a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn and was heading for them.

"He has come back to check on us," said the prince. "You two had better duck. I'll put on glasses and a yachting cap. I don't think he would remember me."

The boys ducked beneath the gunwale, and as Biff listened, he could hear the roar of an approaching boat. He watched the prince and saw the young man smile and wave. The roar of the boat rose, then died away, and their boat felt its swell.

"He really studied me as he passed," said the prince, without turning his head, "but he's going on his way again. I think it's all right."

Biff lifted his head above the side and looked out to see Rex Craig's boat fading in the direction of the pearl fishing fleet. "There isn't anything lying beyond that fleet that I remember," said Biff. "He's got to be heading for one of those boats. Let's go!"

"But which boat would we go to and what would we do when we got there?" asked Ahmed.

"Well, I would guess it would be the boat where he parks his launch," said Biff. "As for what we'd do, let's hope we find evidence of drilling activity going on."

"If we get close enough in this boat for that, we're sure to be seen," said the prince.

"Not if we waited till the moon was low, stashed the boat and swam the last hundred yards," said Biff. He looked up at the moon. "Beautiful night for a swim, I'd say."

CHAPTER XVIII

Greased Pig

BACK at the dock, it occurred to the boys to call the airport and find out where Flight Thirty-seven was headed. It was apparent since Rex Craig had sent his baggage there, that he intended to take that flight. Knowing the time of the plane's departure would give them some idea how long the fake reporter intended to be on the boat he had headed for, and thus how much time they would have to carry out their plan to investigate the boat.

When Ahmed returned from the phone booth at the dock, he announced, "Flight 37 goes to Moscow."

"Boy!" said Biff. "You talk about a plot thickening. When does it leave?"

"Eight tomorrow morning," said Ahmed.

"That must mean Craig—or whatever his name is—intends to stay out there all night," said the prince.

"Which at least gives us time to maneuver," said

Biff. "But the bad part is, he may be pulling up stakes —or pulling up the drill and planning to beat it."

"I believe you are right," said the prince. "And the moment the boat leaves Saudi Arabian territorial waters, it is beyond our government's jurisdiction. But if we sent the police to that boat on a wild goose chase, I would be afraid to face the finance minister."

"I know what you mean," said Biff. "What my dad would think about me messing in international affairs, I'd hate to tell you. He says he comes to these countries to solve technical problems and spends half his time getting me out of jams."

They stared out into the ocean toward the pearl fleet and slumped back in the boat to wait for the moon to dip lower in the sky. Slowly, the sounds of the city began to dim and the harbor grew quieter. There wasn't a chance of any of them sleeping, so they began to prepare for the job ahead. They decided they would swim in their shorts. However, when Biff stripped down, the prince shook his head.

"You've got to do something about that light skin and hair," he said. "You would shine like a phosphorescent fish."

"Here," said Ahmed, reaching back toward the engine. "How about this?" He held up a can of black engine grease.

"Oh no!" Biff moaned.

"Oh yes!" answered the two Arabs.

"What I do for your country," Biff grumbled. "Okay, slap it on." He stood up and flinched as the two boys proceeded to coat him from head to foot with the gooey mess.

"I feel like a channel swimmer," Biff said.

The prince looked up to where a few filmy clouds had gathered across the face of the moon.

"Why don't we go?" he said. "If we wait much longer, we'll be too nervous to swim."

The boys agreed, and a few minutes later, the prince had backed the launch out of the slip, and they were speeding toward the pearl fleet far out in the Persian Gulf. The prince slackened speed as they drew near the fleet; and in the distance, they could see each of the boats lit as if by a torch, at the stern of the vessels.

"They burn a torch all night to keep insects away," said the prince. "The divers sleep out on deck because of the heat in the holds."

Slowly, they crept toward the line of dumpy ships bobbing gently at anchor. About two hundred yards off, the prince stopped his engine and dropped anchor. As he started to rise out of his seat, Biff said, "Prince, you shouldn't go."

"And why not?" the prince demanded.

"Because there's nothing three can do that two can't," said Biff. "You ought to stay here in case we need a boat in a hurry, or in case somebody on one of the boats sees this launch and you have to move it. We won't be gone long. We'll just have a look and be right back."

The prince knew Biff was right and slumped back in his seat. He patted each of the boys as they slipped over the side. With Biff in the lead, he and Ahmed struck out for the line of pearl fishers.

They were two thirds of the way to the boats when

Biff suddenly remembered something. The sharks. The captain of the last boat in line had complained about their motor attracting sharks. Biff felt a chill creep up his spine. But then he had a second thought. Could it have been that the captain of that boat had wanted to keep them away from his boat for some reason and had used this complaint to accomplish it? Biff decided to start with that captain's boat. It was the last boat in line and they headed for it.

Biff's hunch looked accurate indeed, for as they swam quietly toward the ship, they could see a launch tied to the stern, bumping gently against the ship.

Trying to keep his mind off sharks, Biff led the way toward the pearl fisher, reached and grabbed hold of the anchor cable. In another moment, Ahmed joined him, and they looked up to where the anchor disappeared over the side of the ship high above them.

"Now what?" Ahmed whispered.

As Biff's fingers gripped the anchor chain, he felt something like a thick cable of some sort. He ran his hand along it and saw that it vanished into the dark waters alongside the anchor chain. He gave it a little shake and saw that it ran up over the side, free and independent of the chain.

"Well, what have we here?" he whispered.

Ahmed felt the cable and shook his head.

"It feels warm—almost hot," said Biff. "As if it's carrying current—or something."

"I wonder where it leads?" asked Ahmed.

"I think we ought to find out," said Biff.

"I was afraid you would say that," said Ahmed.

"If I hadn't, you would have," said Biff.

"Don't bet on it," said Ahmed.

Biff started up the anchor chain, hand over hand. The ship lay low in the water, and it didn't take him long to make the journey. He hesitated as he reached the boat rail and looked cautiously over the deck. There was no one in sight. Ahmed soon joined him, and they started over the rail. Ahmed made it easily but Biff slid off the rail and landed with a thump.

"That darned grease," he complained huskily.

They paused to see whether they had attracted attention anywhere on the ship, but were satisfied they hadn't. Biff located the odd cable strung across the deck, and noted that it led into the hold.

"Whatever that is attached to, is down below," he whispered.

"We've come this far," said Ahmed.

"Okay . . . follow me," Biff whispered. He headed for the companionway which led below deck. A couple of times he felt himself slide along the rail going down, and as they reached the second deck, they found themselves in a dark passageway. Toward the midships area, they saw a dim light shining from a cabin.

They tiptoed toward the light slanting out into the passageway. As they did, they began to hear voices —Arabic voices. Biff's heart was beating so loudly he was sure it could be heard by every pearl diver on the ship. They took two more steps toward the door, then Ahmed gripped Biff's arm. "That voice," he whispered. "The same voice we heard at the minaret —same accent."

Biff crept up to the door, which hung slightly ajar, and together he and Ahmed peered inside.

Seated in a chair was Rex Craig, and he was speaking Arabic like a native. There was no doubt now who the man in the white *abbas* was. A few feet from Craig sat another man wearing a navy cap and a two-day growth of beard. A limp cigarette hung from his mouth, and he wore a shirt which was at least a week older than his beard. It was the ship's captain, who had yelled at them earlier in the day. A console covered with dials and needles was at Rex Craig's fingertips. Behind it lay the machine whose picture the boys had taken at the minaret!

After a moment or so of listening to the two men, Biff motioned Ahmed to retreat with him to a small alcove in the passageway.

"What are they talking about?" asked Biff.

"Craig is telling the captain about the sound drill," said Ahmed.

"Sound drill?" Biff whispered.

"That's what he calls it," said Ahmed. "What could it mean?"

Biff thought for a moment. "It could mean only one thing," he said. "It's a drill using ultra-sonic sound instead of a bit to drill with."

"I don't understand," whispered Ahmed.

"Sound waves so rapid that they can shatter anything they contact. I've heard of dentists' drills using the principle, but I didn't know it had been developed so that the same principle could be used to drill rock. That's the gimmick then. That's an ultra-sonic sound generator in there. It generates sounds beyond the range of the human ear. They probably have it built so it can burrow through the ground like a mole. That's where that cable was leading—to the ultra-sonic drill down below on the floor of the gulf."

"And with this, they have been slant-drilling into the Ghawar pool from beyond the edge of the fields," said Ahmed.

"Exactly," said Biff.

"They are taking it out of here tonight," said Ahmed. "He was telling the captain about a rendezvous point at sea where it would be picked up by another ship."

"Then we had better get out of here and arrange to stop them somehow," whispered Biff. "Let's go."

Together, they crept along the passageway in the direction from which they had come. Biff had his foot on the first step of the companionway and was starting up when he saw a foot starting down. He turned and pushed Ahmed ahead of him. Then he heard the sound of hurrying steps and a man's cry of alarm.

There was nowhere to run but straight down the passageway toward the steps at the other end. It would mean passing the door of the room where Rex Craig and the captain sat, but there was no alternative. They ran down the dark way and just as they drew abreast of the door, it opened and into their path stepped Rex Craig. The open door lighted the passageway and with a cry, he recognized the two boys.

He spread his arms to intercept them. Biff tried to stop, but he could not and ran straight into the arms of Rex Craig. But then a wonderful thing happened. The tall reporter squeezed and Biff shot out of his grasp like a greased pig. The reporter grabbed at him again, and again Biff slipped free. As he did, he pushed Ahmed back in the other direction and started toward the man hurrying down the passageway. The man grabbed for Biff, and again the grease did its job. Biff squirmed free. As he did, he rammed an elbow into the man's middle and the fellow went down with a grunt. In his anxiety to get away, Biff ran into Ahmed and smeared him with some of the grease. Both of them ran up the steps but to their shock, there was another man waiting there and as he started toward him, Biff stopped, pointed down the steps and shouted, "He went that way!"

For a moment the man stared at him, and in that instant, Biff took the two remaining steps to the top, grabbed the man by the shirt collar and pulled him forward. The man reached for Biff to keep his balance, but Biff's slippery coating offered no hold and the man pitched headlong down the steps just in time to meet Rex Craig and the other pursuer, who had reached the bottom of the steps. The whole bunch went down in a heap.

The two boys stood alone at the top of the steps, but only temporarily. Aroused by the noise, some of the native pearl divers had started forward. The boys started to back away as a curious phalanx of the almost naked men began edging toward them. Step by step, the boys backed toward the stern of the ship as the divers began to close in on them.

Breathing heavily, Rex Craig finally made it to the top of the steps. A moment later, he was joined by the captain. With a loud cry, the man who called himself Craig reached down and jerked free the little chamois bag hanging from the captain's belt. He fairly screamed something in Arabic at the divers.

"He offers the bag of pearls to the men who take us alive," Ahmed puffed.

Biff looked about for a means of escape. There was only one, over the side. He began to edge toward the rail when one of the divers darted to cut off his escape. Biff felt the heat of the torch at his back and with a quick turn, he grabbed it from its socket and held it over his head. He began to whirl it in front of him and the man at the rail backed off.

"Get ready to jump!" he gasped to Ahmed. The Arab boy nodded, and Biff whirled the torch around his head. Then with a heave, he let it go like a blazing machete, straight along the deck toward the divers and Rex Craig. As they darted and jumped to get out of the way of the torch, Biff climbed upon the rail and dived high and far. He could barely see the water rushing at him and he hit with a neck-jarring splash. A second later, he felt Ahmed cleave the water beside him. They were on the side toward the prince's launch. If only they could make it, or if only he could make it to them!

But in the next instant, the water around them was churned with diving bodies. The pearl divers leaped after them from the deck above, eager for the reward which represented a fabulous fortune to any one of them. Biff was sure they didn't know why these two boys were worth what Rex Craig had offered, but it was clear the pearl divers meant to collect.

"Go down!" Biff shouted at Ahmed. "Head for the launch!"

Down they dived—down into the dark water, and then Biff struck out in the direction of the launch.

He knew he couldn't possibly stay under water as long as any one of these pearl divers, but he and Ahmed had the advantage of knowing where they were going and the divers would have to find them. Then too, he figured they were almost indistinguishable from any other diver in the dark water.

But it didn't turn out that way.

When Biff finally ran out of air and decided to surface, he opened his eyes and discovered that on his first journey to the top, he had come up between four eager divers. They closed in on him and grabbed.

"Hey, fellows, he said alive, remember?" Biff yelled as he felt the hands grabbing at him and threatening to tear him limb from limb. The grease did help some. He wrested free from one, then another, but there was always a new pair of arms to grab him and he saw that Ahmed was in the same predicament. Biff was running out of steam and he knew the game was up. After a last squirm, he gave up as he felt a hand reach out, grab his hair and start to drag him back toward the boat.

It was at that moment that he saw flashing lights of red and green and thought he was about to black out from exhaustion. But in another moment the red and green lights were accompanied by a siren, and suddenly he felt himself released, and the divers began to shout among themselves. Biff looked out across the water. It seemed the surface was literally alive with boats. And in the prow of one stood Tom Brewster!

Biff gasped for air and began to yell. The boat containing his dad headed for him and someone threw him a life preserver. As he grabbed for it, he looked around for Ahmed and saw the prince's boat picking him up. The last thing he saw was the pearl divers swimming frantically for the ship and Rex Craig standing at the ship's rail impaled by the beam of the spotlight. Craig had his hands in the air, and a voice on a bull horn was commanding him to stay where he was or be shot.

Then Biff passed out.

CHAPTER XIX

Same Old Story

"TELL me again how you tracked us down, Dad," said Biff, from the back seat of the Cadillac. "I still can't believe it." They were speeding across the desert toward Riyadh, and his father sat in the front seat beside the prince. In the rear, on each side of Biff, sat Ahmed and his father.

"Well, when we missed you boys at the palace after the meeting with the King, we decided you had gone to Al Thaza. The finance minister told us you had tried to get him to investigate the machine at the minaret and that he had not done so. Then too, the long-distance operator heard your New York phone call inquiring about Rex Craig. He heard the man at *Global News* tell you Craig was going to Dharan. We decided to go to Al Thaza, hoping we could catch you there. When we arrived at the minaret, you had gone, but we found your sketch in the sand with the big X at the Persian Gulf. This, combined with the information gained from the phone call, made us decide you had gone to Dharan. The finance minister told us also that the prince's family kept a launch berthed at the dock there. We contacted the Dharan harbor police and went to look for the launch. We found it gone so we decided to go looking for the boat and you. We roamed all over the waterfront and finally saw the commotion going on aboard the pearl fisher. I felt sure, with all that excitement, my boy Biff must be mixed up in it somehow. The rest, you know."

"And you captured the supersonic sound drill intact?" asked Biff.

"Yes . . . plus Rex Craig, alias Boris Schmidloff."

"You mean he wasn't an American at all?"

"He had been trained in a communist school which can turn out synthetic Americans by the dozen," said Tom Brewster. "They live in an American atmosphere under American conditions, learning American speech patterns until they almost think American. Then they get their espionage assignments."

"Where is the real Rex Craig?" asked Biff.

"He had been drugged and held captive in first one boat, then another," said Tom Brewster. "Boris Schmidloff had intended to release Craig when he took off for Moscow on Flight 37. Since the real Rex Craig had a history of drinking, Schmidloff knew the man's story of being drugged would be disbelieved by the *Global News* office in New York."

"What was the motive for all this slant drilling into the Ghawar oil field?" asked Biff.

"We think it was a plot to reduce the pressure to the point where it would appear that the Americans were inefficient and wasteful so the Saudi Arabian government would want to cancel their leases. The conspirators had a company all set up to step in under a phony name and take over the leases. If this failed, they intended to keep drilling until the field went flat, causing it to cease production. That would raise the price of oil so as to benefit their own oil holdings in the communist sphere."

"And this sonic drill is really revolutionary, eh?" said Biff.

"Simply amazing," said his father. "We estimate it to be at least ten times as fast as orthodox drills. It enabled them to slant drill from as far as eight miles away. It will unquestionably revolutionize the methods for drilling in the oil fields. But we are now the only ones in possession of such a drill."

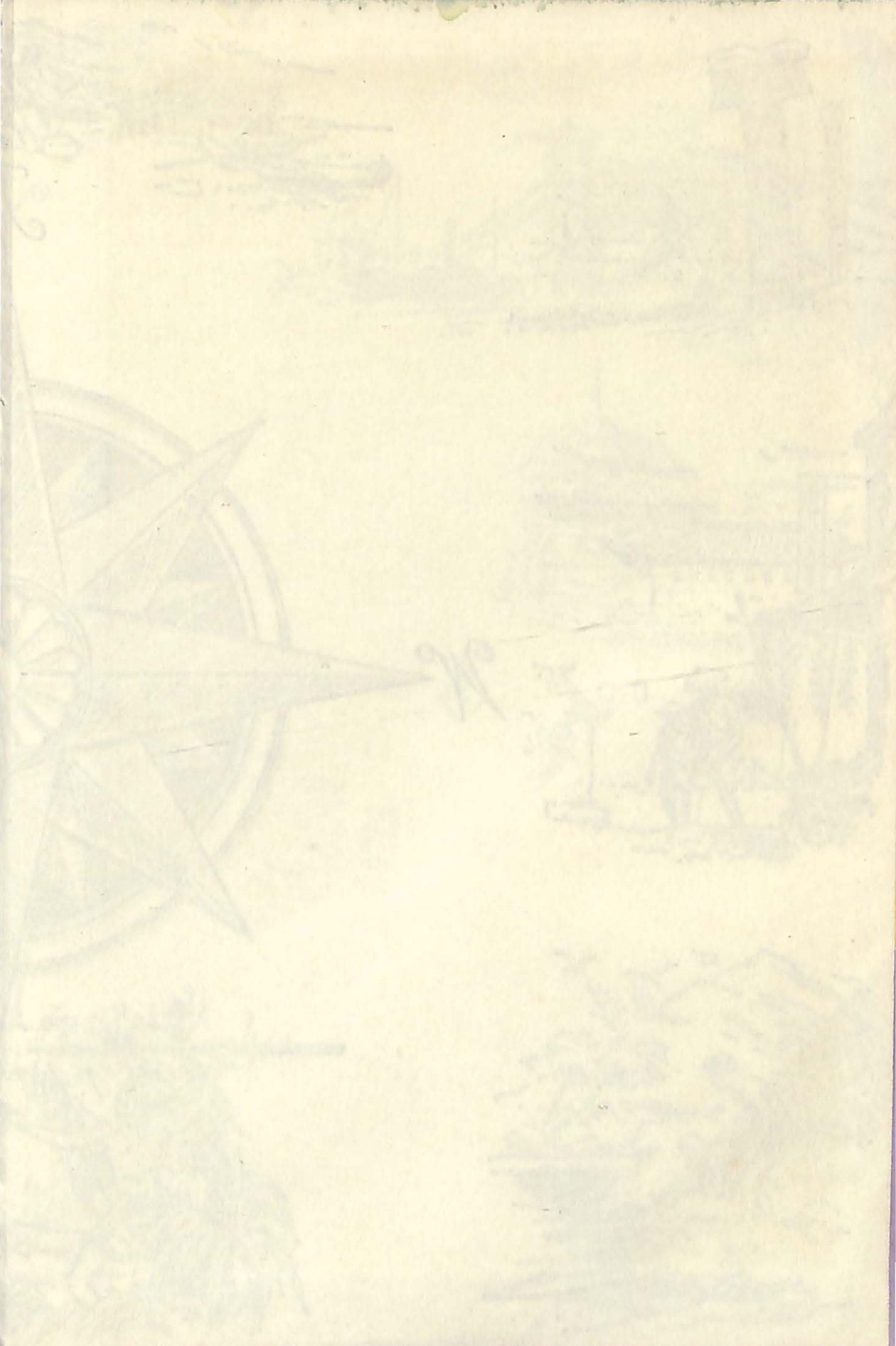
"And all because of a lost horse, eh, Ahmed?" said Biff.

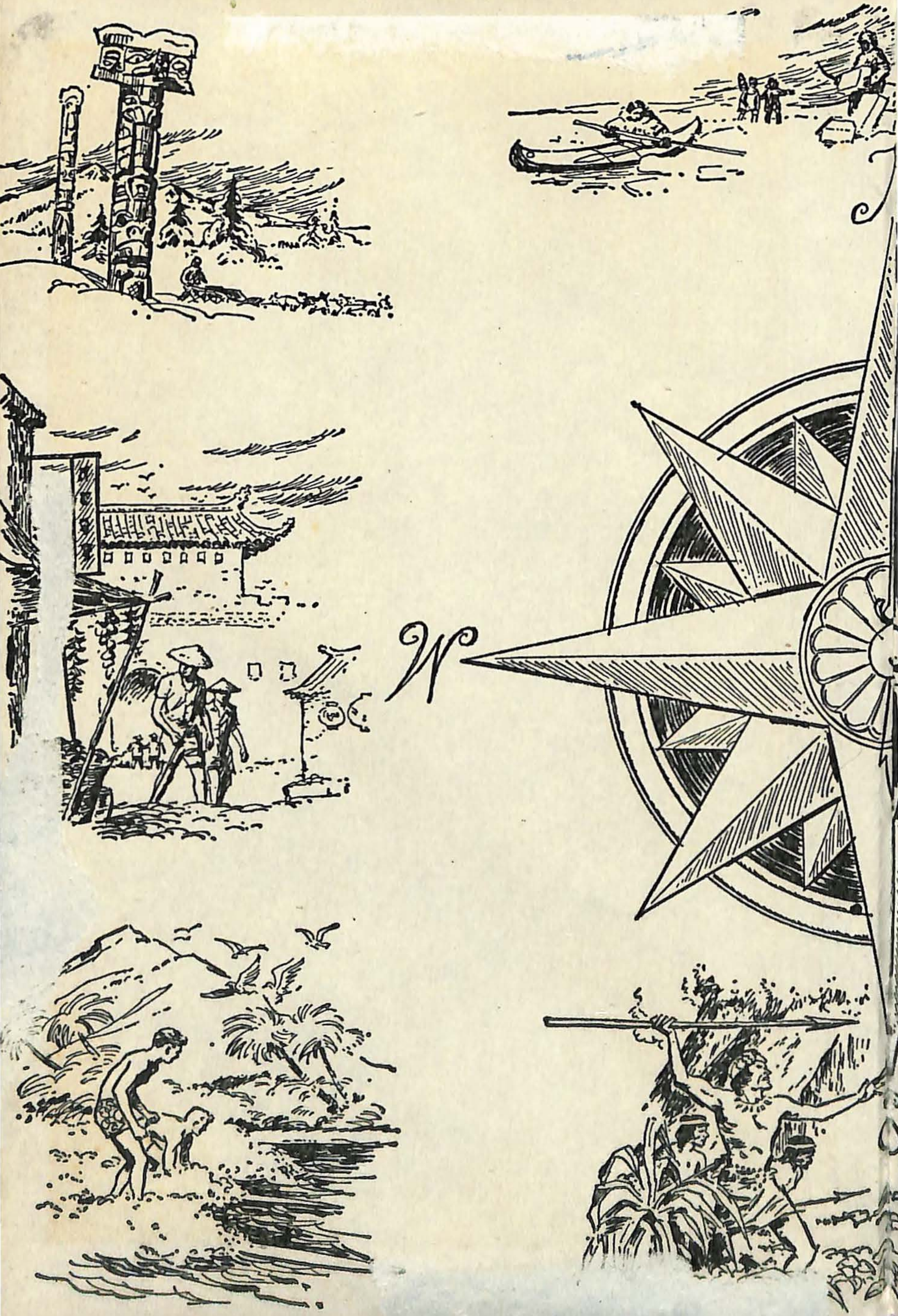
"Lost is correct," said Ahmed. "I understand Suji was not stolen at all. The Hambasah was captured and said it was true that Suji had followed his gray mare to their camp. The only reason he had tried to harm us was because Rex Craig—Boris Schmidloff—had told him we had his picture in your camera and it could send him to prison. He says he is sorry he ever believed what Craig told him about the oil companies ruining his tribe's oasis."

"Look, boys," said the prince, pointing ahead toward the entrance to the royal palace. "Someone is waiting for you."

There, silhouetted against the Arabian sky, stood a golden Arabian horse, his mane streaming in the breeze. Beside him towered a sleepy-looking camel and between them, a small boy in a ragged shift, holding their reins.

"Well—if you'll excuse something I have been trying *not* to say for the last half hour—Oil's well that ends well," said Biff Brewster.

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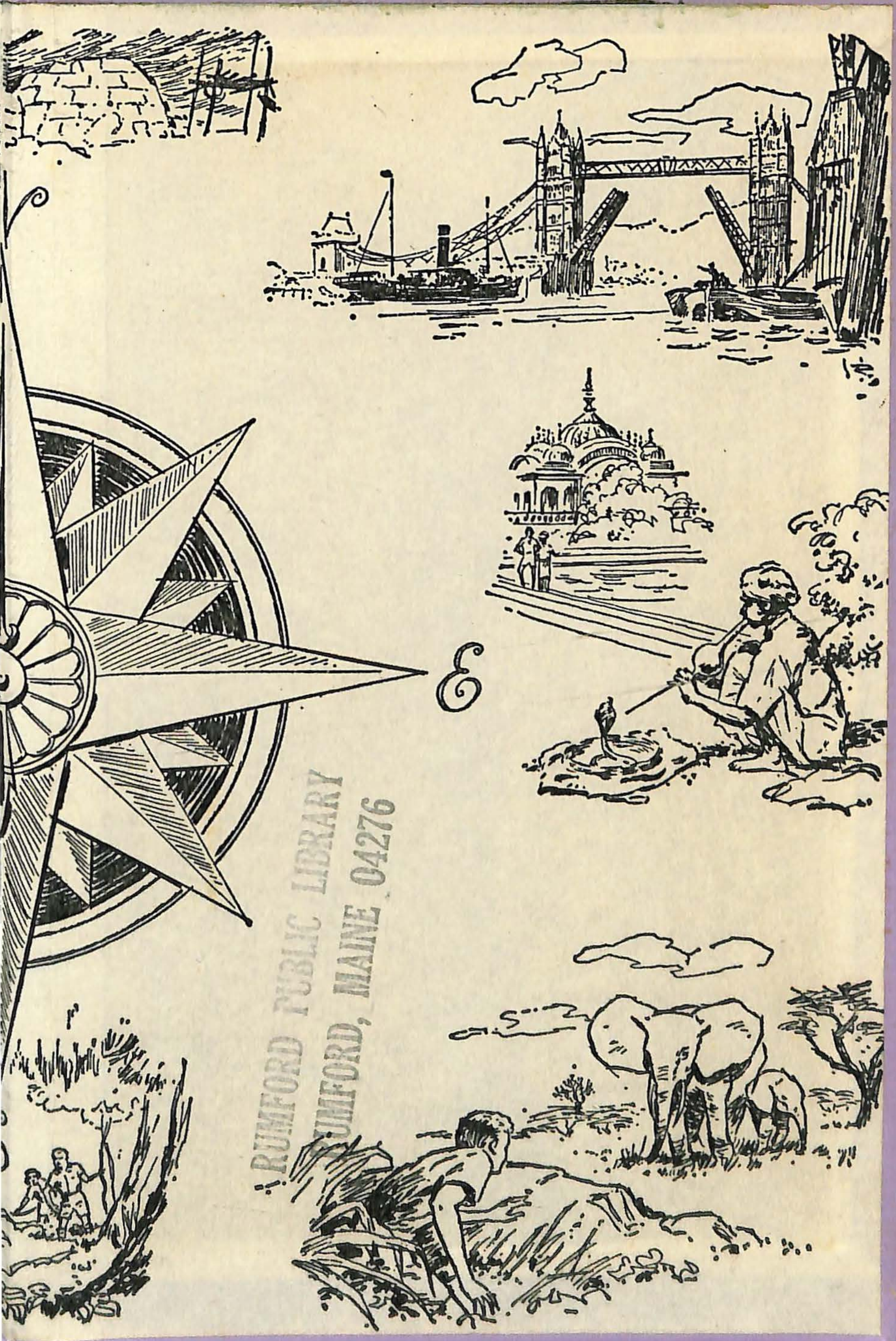

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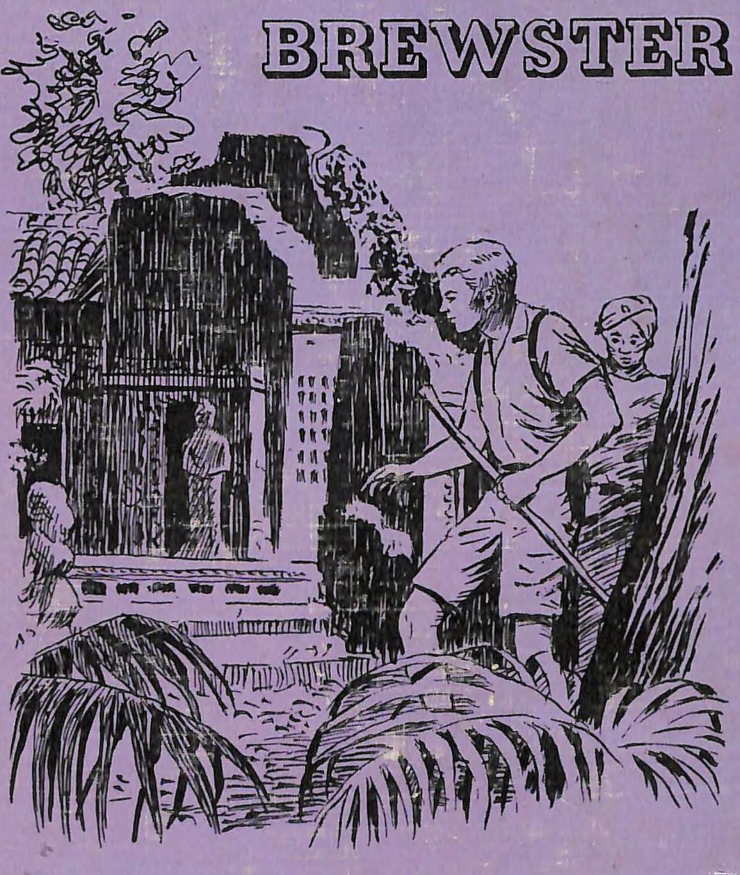

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